Practical Communication in Class

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The image I had of Communication, through university life was everything except practical. It was more about all the types of communication phenomenon and very theoretical. But, through teaching foreign languages, the students I meet, need more advice and practice for daily communication situations, so that is why I chose this subject.

I first started to hear the word "Communication", when I entered University as a student with a major in "Public Communication". All the theories were quite interesting but I do not think I really need to think through them in my ordinary life, even professional life. And beyond University, study is not a compulsory education anymore, so it is supposed to teach specific or specialized fields. But as it is for most of students the last step before they start their working life, it is a last chance, too, to master or get to speak up in a foreign language, as here English, as I did. In fact, my English was at a desperate level when I graduated from high school and from University I felt more eager to improve myself and was finally enough mature to make those foreign words, a bit mine, as Ms. Leduby used to say "University is mainly an optional step which represents extra time to get mature" [1].

The years going by, and looking at some students with a deep lack of confidence, I deeply believe more and more that they need to work not

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[1] Ms. Leduby, former Economy and Social Studies teacher at St Martin High school, in Rennes, France .

only their English skills but even more on their regular Communication skills, too. How to do that ? The shortest answer I could give, would be "Practical Communication" practices. In longer words or pages, I would like to explore it through the techniques I use most often as well as peers observations. First the mental aspect, then the effective practice to cover the needs. All those lines to try to show you that foreign languages can be mastered even when the learner is seen as a non-natural learner for languages.

I. The mental aspect

In any learning field, we do not feel equal and depending on the subject, some are stronger or weaker. We will concentrate on languages, and especially English which will be used for concrete examples.

a) Learning predispositions

Here, we will first consider what type of learners we have, to help students to find out which kind they are and how it can help them. With the years the groups of learning types have grown, but as a base, I mainly use two of them: the auditory learners and the visual learners. There is no kind better than the other but one can be considered with greater aptitude depending of the studying field.

So, we should help students to find out which type they are. Here is a test I remember a teacher gave us in 3rd grade of elementary school in France, so it is really in the reach of anyone. You can find details in <u>La</u>

différenciation pédagogique. Some teachers make students aware of those difference types to help them to find an adapted learning technique. How to test? Give 20 words orally in a certain order with 3 seconds between each word. Then make students wait 10 seconds before they start writing. And finally, let them write as many words as then can, in a limited time, 2 or 3 minutes. The important thing is to note how many words are right and if the order is correct. Next test is to show a different list of 20 words, one by one with 3 seconds laps time, on a board or projector system. Nobody must say them. Make students wait 10 seconds, and then they have 3 minutes to write as many words as they remember. Finally, we compare the results altogether. People who remembered more listened words, are auditory type, and on the other hand, the one who remembered more read words, are visual type. Of course, more words we get, better the order was, mean stronger is our memory in that type. And after that, it can be really valuable to make students exchange on the process, on how they did in their head to remember. It can be a first interesting way to make students think about studying ways, about memorization tactics.

Because everyone's memory is not a static feature; anyone can always work on it. But, after someone knows which kind of learner, he or she is. He or she can adapt, think on his or her studying methods.

During the semester, other moments of learning methods exchange can comfort or motivate students in their path. It is a decisive point to make them independent in their learning process. But it is not all, and we will continue with particular difficulties as inner stoppers.

b) Participation and confidence

Depending on culture, on characters, on abilities, Communication can be felt like easier or more difficult and can be defined on different basis. So here, as we teach English, we should consider "expressing yourself in a Western way of thinking." This implies that people stand and speak up for themselves.

In that context, it can be difficult to communicate for shy persons or persons who have been raised in an environmental sphere in which being quiet is better considered. We will examine all those publics as the shy group and that to incite such public to express themselves in a foreign language will need some patience and mechanical practices to get rid of those inner stoppers. They will be the biggest challenges in an Oral Communication class. But our task is to help them because, if they register in such a class, it is because they are willing to take a chance or they dream to change, but they do not necessarily believe they can do it.

For the shy persons, the hardest barrier resides in their own opinion of themselves, which links to self-confidence. Getting that confidence is also a major challenge. Depending on the level of shyness of our subject, different steps should be considered, above all to adapt the teaching and how much we can push the learners or not.

The first need should be to recognize those or this shy student(s), because if we push them too much at first, they may not come again and we would be no help furthermore. So, be sure to spot those learners to

adjust some activities if needed. For example, I did a disaster with a mime game once; using it to review vocabulary and wishing to make a fun mood, but one of the students never came back to the classroom. In the first classes I totally recognized myself at the same age and wanted her to improve faster than me, but I ended up in pushing too much. Rushing is not the best adviser and maturity stays a significant ingredient in getting strength.

In the early years as a teacher, my eagerness and inexperience made me forget how scary such activities could be for a shy person, how in school I felt when my classmates would ask me at the end of a class "Why do you always just smile or laugh when the teacher asks you a question ?" and at that time, for me, it seemed like the only way to escape this spotlight moment. Now, I truly believe, that it was such a waste. But that irrational behaviour could be only explained because of the difference of point of view. What I remember about the feeling is I was totally scared, that I only thought that what I would say would be a stupidity and I could live without that skill. But, after the "month" that helped me to get rid of that feeling, I definitely forgot about that disability and started to talk so much.

What happened during that month ?

Actually, I did not get perfectly fluent in a month or even high scores at an official English test, I just got that **even me could speak English.** I just had to keep talking in a way or another to get myself understood. As well, I understood that there are many words, expressions, gesture

to express the same point with very similar meaning; and that worrying if it was correct to say it that way or not, was inessential. In the worst case, I could think about it after I tried and see the reaction, then I could just try again. During all my school years, I was extremely shy and when I got to that stage, I was almost 20 years old. Even it seems a little bit late, now believing that this maturity process was necessary is a much more positive attitude, so I try not to regret too much and concentrate on keeping in mind that by trying and trying someday, I got to buy bus passes and find places on my own by interacting in different foreign situations. At first there was always a big part of apprehension to get to a new language school on my own, walking in a city I knew so little about but, I could get there and did it.

Another point, I realized in the month I spent in a homestay in Vancouver, was that sometimes what stopped me to try, to understand was that I did not trust my own instinct. Before, it was like I had a little voice in my head telling me "No, it cannot be that. Do not be silly, you cannot understand that easily. You will look so stupid.". That little voice may be similar to many shy persons, and is the real inner stopper, but giving chances to students to take risks and make them realize they can make it, is a support which takes time. Teachers must keep trying, too.

And, when we learn a different language, it is linked to a cultural background that learners do not necessarily have. Sometimes it can even hurt the basics of their own cultural background. For example, during that homestay in Canada, the 8 year old of the family asked me to get him on the kitchen's counter; with the gesture it was really clear. But I

did not believe my understanding because, in France, there is no way you can be allowed to put your or someone's feet on another surface than the floor. Please, do not misunderstand that family, the education was very thought to grow independence of children. And this child wanted me to put him there because he wanted to get dishes to set up the table, so I was very unsupportive for him.

c) Language accuracy

During class, encouraging students by saying "it is not important if you do not say it perfectly just try, keep trying and you will get it better and better" is a good positive mind to build up trust and get them to open up, but it is not all. Because, if we let them expressing themselves with mistakes all the time, the risk is that someday this learner will get caught by reality situations. In the real world, some native speakers are not afraid to say how awful the foreign language skills are to their conversation partner. It is not a big a deal if you do not care, but if that learner does not have much confidence, it will rip off the small amount of it. So taking a good balance with grammar, writing, speaking, pronunciation, reading classes would be the ideal situation if the Course permit it.

d) Voice Volume

Some shy persons have an additional characteristic to speak with a very low voice when they finally try. This peculiarity does not serve them either and can make them even more nervous. Sometimes their voice will be so small that the listener will need to ask to repeat once or few times,

but in some cases, the classmates have a gift to hear it, I consider it as a warm support from fellows which does not solve the problem, but at least can be the sign to build a nice dynamic in the class.

We can explain to the Shy that if he or she is asked to repeat few times, it is not because they make mistakes, but because they are not audible.

Easy to understand, usually when I talk about that or imitate this point, most of students laugh; but it is less much easy to get rid of such an habit, for this look at the following parts in the solution activities.

e) Relaxed atmosphere

To help them talk too, make them relaxed is an important thing but we do not want to lose our authority. To relax, we do not need to make them listen to a special music, but using humor would be much better. That can be a real challenge for some teachers. As some persons are good at humor and others are not really or not so much. We will see some alternatives to deal with that feature.

Putting humor in class definitely helps the students to lose this scary representation they have of speaking up. A warm environment helps to feel in confidence or at least to reach it.

As a guide, frequently we should remember students to keep practicing and believing they can.

Next, we will propose some strategies to work on shyness, mood and participation.

II. Effective practice

First we have to work on the class balance, which will be different every year, or even every semesters and depending on levels you need to adapt. Connecting with the class, with the students is so important to help them open-up, so how can we do that ?

I never thought about it in my first years of teaching, never felt it as a problem, but maybe in ruff years you get ruff yourself and loose some of your sense of humor or if by nature, the teacher is more of a "strict" or "expert" type, this can bring a cooling effect in the class. In an idealistic image, this should not happen, but it does, so we will consider it as an opportunity to question ourselves, as a reminder to recall our first policy with the aim of maximizing the class potential. So the first time, you even feel that, one way would be to discuss with co-workers, another would be to have a look or watch a class from which you often hear laughs. It can help to recall how to get learner's attention. So here are some situations for which I listed ideas from much more experienced teachers and some from mine: begin with communication tool hints, continue with getting over silence, next working on language accuracy and after that a look at the voice volume, then finish with hints to get a relaxed atmosphere.

Note that * mark means to report to activity books listed in the bibliography.

a) Basic communication tools & Participation

First, we will talk about basic words, which we can call the magic words in social life like: *hello, good bye, please, thank you* among others. Actually, when you connect with the class, it sounds quite natural that students will greet you back. But if for some reasons, students do not, it may be because they are very shy, feel uncomfortable or the teacher symbolizes too much the authority. If students lose their speaking ability in front of the educator, even to say "hello". That is a problem. The "hello" from the group is ok, still individual greetings are even more invaluable, and we feel the student will be fine when he or she will be able to be the first to say "hello". Sometimes, we think it is so little, but hello and smiles are things that people can give to anyone without hurting them and without costing them anything. Hello and smiles usually bring another hello and smile to other faces.

Preach is not always the best choice, but sometimes if we feel we do not have other alternatives, we can feel like pointing that out. As often, a smooth way is better to make it from the heart and not like an obligation. If we do not need to take the bull by the horns that way, here are some natural ways.

The teacher smiles when entering the classroom and greet students, and when possible: "Hello + student name" above all when you want an answer from a particular student. Depending on the degree of the students' level we can add a positive comment on their hair, fashion style or anything that comes to your mind. Especially for shy students, we

would recommend first to keep it simple, greet them with their name. When it is too long, the shy students panic easily in their head and forget the hello, to just think *"What did he/she tell me ? What should I answer ?"*. We will get things done little by little.

We should not give up. Sometimes having wordless students to a simple greeting can make teachers feel like they talk to walls, but by making those simple words more personal and show students that their greetings make a difference, will push them gently.

As instructors, we must be the ones who do not give it up the first and explaining clear expectations at the beginning of the semester can be an explicit compromise.

Regarding participation, the basic interrogation type, the teacher pointing a student and question-answer, is not the best one to use in that case. You could put at least a "3 hands rule", change the question to students "who wants…?" by asking *"who doesn't want… ?"* in that case, the ones who do not have their hands up mean they want to do it. They will be quite surprise at the beginning but we should get students more attentive to the teacher words, another way we particularly affectionate when we feel that the silence is more from laziness, above all when we ask them if they have a question, and when they do not, we can play the student who has some. The problem with this attempt, this could give a strict impression to students.

b) Activities to get over silence and even more participation

From 16 teaching years' experience from toddlers to adults, from

various books I used, and from co-workers exchange, here are some of the activities I found particularly effective to work on students'needs.

One option to get over silence and stimulate students to get active in their study process, is to propose them acting, improvisations and gesture activities.

The thing is those tasks can be a delicate matter when you have shy students and acting can be too much time consuming for classes'hours. Improvisations activities could become a nightmare for shy students unless they are willing to do it. If they are prepared psychologically, it can be ok, as nowadays in France it is used to "cure" shyness. Concerning the gesture activity, instructors need to be careful too; above all with students whom it is not the culture to use gesture, but it is more approachable. The gesture activity we use most is the mime game to review vocabulary∗. Just start by asking: Have you ever played the gesture game in kindergarten or school? , that way, we know if we need to adapt or not. In extreme cases, start with only the teacher doing the mime, and when the public starts to laugh and relax, they can try, but if a student is reluctant do not push him or her too much and let the game continue with the next student and think about the alternative to do it in small groups rather the full class.

If you need a softer way to make them stand in front of others, review vocabulary with "Draw and Guess" activity in groups to make shy students standing without having to talk.

But we always want to try and make student get a little bit used to gestures, at least by miming, because it is so natural to use our hands when we talk and it helps to get understood. Although, it is a good way to show that anyone can be and feel foolish, in addition to take things less seriously, less personally. As a support, teacher should show that it is ok, and should restrain from giving advice during the task.

To get students used to speak in front of an audience, better to start small, and let them get used to such skills little by little. So, pairs'work is often the best combination to start. Students get used to participation gradually, then small groups activities and sometimes in front of the class, because anyway, when they get in the working world, they will have those situations they cannot escape from, so it is a big point to make them conscious that those challenges they have to face in class, are only for their benefits and not to judge them. Maybe the need the teacher has to explain shows as immature the learner is, but everyone has a different pace to get mature; we should appreciate this timing and try to help that step.

If even in such conditions, students will not talk much, which happens a lot with the level I teach, here is another tool: **a running dictation.** Most of Western children have a bad image of dictation, but this is an adapted version for foreign learners. For other culture which do not use ABC alphabet, such activity usually does not exist. At this level, it is important to choose an easy text using daily life English. Students are paired: one sits and writes the other stands and goes back and forth between the text and his or her partner. The dictation text should be on a wall or on a desk

but cannot be removed. For the first tries, to put the shy persons in good conditions, we should pair them with someone they feel confident with or who is comprehensive.

Be careful to give a different text to each pair as they cannot be helped from other pair's dictation. To keep it fair, teachers will need to give a same amount letters or words text and similar theme.

This activity has various good effects beyond using calories, learners need to use the foreign language without expressing about themselves, memorize English words, sentences, repeat them many times as needed and have to spell words too. It can be done on a weekly basis, taking 10 -15 minutes depending on the text, and a limited time or fast finishers win rule can be applied. It pushes all students to use English, even the most reluctant in a fun way. Of course, more groups they are, more the tension, excitement will get high. Let them enjoy too. Punctuation words should be introduced after trying this task one or two times; otherwise, it seems a lot to get used to.

Finally, depending on the level, it can also be a ritual in a class, to give the possibility to each students to participate, a nice alternative from questioning is that you use a "(think-)pair-share"* system. The teacher gives a question on daily life to all students, which they note and think about if their level requires, otherwise, they can start to ask each other the question and take notes of their partner answers. After that, everyone reports to a group or the class, depending students number. In that way, everybody gets to speak twice, to their partner and to the class.

c) Working on language accuracy

When you teach young adults, they already have been studying English for more than 3 years, so they know the grammar but it is often all mixed up and need to master it as a reflex and not just understanding it. When I graduated from high school myself, my English grades were catastrophic. I could not converse properly but could read and write in English. In university, I came across which became my English bible: Basic English Grammar series written by Betty Schrampfer Azar, which we used to call *"the Azar"* book. The method is based on repetitive written and oral exercises and we would do pages and pages, but after using it, I needed less and less to check and words would come to my mind spontaneously, without translating in my head and making it a simple act.

Subsequently, to work on language accuracy means to take some time to focus on it and practice it with drills or repetition activities. The expressions, the patterns must become a reflex. The reflex is the only way to make students speaking without needing to think and consequently, stop the speaking process. To achieve this, there are more or less fun activities. 20 years ago, tapes were used in laboratory school or university and in individual booths, we practiced and recorded drills. Now, technology has improved and CDs, MP3 recordings, CD-ROMs formats are available. Actually, it is not the most important point; using the content of those tools is. I remember as a university student how boring I thought those exercises were. But after, I did them again and again in my room, how grateful I was not to have to think twice, like *what should I say ?*. That routine practice is much needed. From here on,

it was an automatic reflex. Drills can be perceived as a difficult exercise. Because during class time, when low reflex students finally get how it works, drills are almost finished. So making students able to do it on their own time is a big condition, of course they will have to practice themselves, but it is how people get mature and independent. It can start by proposing such tools to borrow from the library institution and they could copy it themselves. Adapting to technology and giving students such tasks to make them taking responsibility for one self is our task. Because more they do it, more naturally the words will come to their mouth; all for their own benefits.

In class time, conversation practices can be adapted to that process by making model conversations in pairs until they can say the expression patterns without checking in their notes or books. One idea to disconnect them from reading is to put the conversation on the board or screen and remove words after another as they practice again and again. It is very progressive and will push them progressively. Keep to their mind that the important is not to learn by heart, but to think based on the situation and select the appropriate studied or known patterns. Patterns expression are important as a life preserver, extra vocabulary will come as they improve.

There are plenty of other ideas, like duet activities* to check in different resources listed in the bibliography.

d) Louder voice

People who are shy or do not have confidence in them often have the

habit to talk with a low voice. For that peculiar "low voice syndrome", no matter, how much the teacher explains the process in a theoretical way that they will be asked to repeat again not because their English is incorrect, but because the listeners cannot hear their words, and if they do not want to have to repeat, they just should say it loud once and they would be out of trouble. Even, they understand this vicious cycle which explanations may make learners smile and nod. That will not fix the problem. It is like a bicycle; we cannot get to ride it by explanations, we need to feel the balance with our body.

Asking the person with that syndrome to repeat as many times as necessary is not the best way either, as in mind, he or she is probably trying to control that device. That person may feel trapped if we insist too much in front of a big group.

Here is a solution idea that works wonderfully. If it is done at the beginning of the class, the "low-voice" students go through with a more audible tone. It is a variation from the previous "running dictation" to a loud version. We will not have to ask "could you say it louder ?" anymore after students get to do it a few times. The only problem is if we have a really large class… it could get too noisy for next door classes.

In that version, nobody runs, still every group has a different text, and the speaker should be at least (1 or)2 meters from his partner, 5-6 meters are much more efficient, but getting them further apart little by little is fine, and adaptation to the actual classroom size is a necessity, too. Even the ones who do not have that much oral problem will become more

conscious of that important detail, and they will pay more attention, too.

e) Classroom mood

Having troubles to get students relaxed and talkative in class, once, a co-worker, Mary Aruga[2], advised me to start the class with jokes. Jokes are not always easy to think of and it does not come easy for everyone, but with practice as other skills, can be mastered . Here are some situation ideas, mainly examples from watching at or listening to other teachers, mainly Mary:

- sometimes we can have trouble remembering, or pronouncing student names for any reason, that you keep mispronouncing or saying a different name. You do not need to get too concerned or excuse yourself either; even after many times mistaking the joke may come funnier. We can just make statements such as "I'm changing your name." or "Is it ok if I change your name ?". That does not sound as a wonderful joke but it is easy to understand, it surprises too, but most of time all the class laughs. If they do not, it could mean they do not get it. So maybe, we should point out that it was a joke. This will help to make the class relax by showing that there are other ways than always apologizing when we make a mistake if this one does not end the world.

- If a student asks the permission to do or use something that we try to restrain, for example using the cell-phone or putting it on the table. Be sure it is asked in English, and we can answer: "Yes, ok. If it is to research something, it is excellent. Of course, use it. If it is to mail your boyfriend/

[2]Mary Aruga, an English teacher, teaching in Shinshu University in Matsumoto, in Honan College in Tatsuno and in Suwa-Tokyo Science University in Chino; and member of JALT-Shinshu Chapter, in Japan.

girlfriend, that's not ok." To make sure students will understand, we can emphasize with our face and voice to show good thing and bad thing. Usually, there are big laughs at the end of the explanation. With that kind of strategy, students get the limits without the fear of authority.

- When students go on another conversation subject, we can bring them back on the lesson subject with expressions such as: *"I'm curious about … ?" or "Could you tell me more about… ?"* and ask follow-up questions with what, why or other question words.

- A little bit similar situation, often the ones who need most of their concentration are just so impatient to see what they can study next in their book, that they forget to practice the actual lesson. To get the attention back on the right page, just scolding them will bring a cold wind into the class atmosphere, so not to lose their ambition, teachers can just say something like *"That's wonderful, but let's look at page…"*. It can work even if students are checking a different notebook or book.

Of course, we cannot list all the situations which would need some sentences ideas. But with those few examples, we already have big hints as to keep positive in the comment we make, keep inviting students to follow the instructions and keep smiling.

CONCLUSION

Depending on students'maturity, some activities above can sound more or less efficient or needed but let keep in mind that if they can

make students open-up that proves their importance. When we learn a language or want to, in most of times, we would like to speak it fluently or at least could get understood. And it seems some persons get to do it and others not. As a teacher, those lines are more to recall of each one teaching policy, motivation and at the end, make the percent of learners able to discuss in that foreign language higher and higher. Persevering in Practical Practices will make it possible.

Those foreign words become one's words, make learners believe in their possibilities and as they communicate with various persons, understanding should grow.

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