Enhancing the oral communicative competence of engineering students

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ABSTRACT

The overall aim of this paper is a survey of the attitudes of engineering students towards oral communication in the English class and what factors may contribute to their activity in doing oral exercises. Oral communication turns out to be an important part of English teaching because it allows for practicing the language and enhancing students’ oral skills. Some of the factors that influence this process are the positive and encouraging atmosphere in the classroom, the meaningful assignments, and the working in small groups, which motivate the learners to be more active in the speaking activities. Most students are convinced that oral communication helps them speak English fluently, which will be useful for their future professional development. Therefore, oral communicative competence should be the central aim of language teaching.

Keywords: communicative competence, oral skills, English teaching and learning, engineering students.

INTRODUCTION

Communication competence is often defined as the ability of speakers to achieve their communicative goals through appropriate and effective interaction. We live in a global world today where our ability to communicate in English is of great importance. To be aware of the latest developments in technology and science the level of English of modern engineers should be relatively high. Since English is the dominant language of communication throughout the world, the ability to use English is necessary not only for studies, but for travelling to other countries and for social and professional international contacts of different kinds.

Communicative competence means a lot more than mere proficiency in the four language learning skills, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. Communicative competence is related to effective and appropriate communication at any circumstances, including in professional situations.
setting. Unlike other subjects, English is skill-oriented which means that learners in the foreign language classroom should frequently be exposed to the foreign language and they should be given as many opportunities as possible to practice it. Therefore, at university within the subject of English, it is vital that students are given many activities to use English orally and practice how to communicate verbally and express themselves in the target language. Thus, learners will be able to improve their speaking skills and develop better communicative competence.

The spoken communicative skill is of complex nature. In a conversation, the utterances cannot be prepared in advance but participants must use the language rapidly. Moreover, what is being said must be right on a number of levels, i.e. it must conform to the speaker’s aim, to the role relationships between the interactants, to the setting, topic, and the linguistic context. Hence, the main goals of the English language curriculum at university related to enhancing students’ communicative competence should be to develop students’ ability to use English to communicate in speech. Also, students should be taught to actively take part in discussions on various subjects and with the help of different strategies to communicate effectively and express their own thoughts in English, as well as to understand the views and experiences of others. Furthermore, students should be able to use English orally in different contexts in order to relate, describe and explain, as well as give reasons for their views.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the students’ attitude, motivation and any possible reasons for unsuccessful accomplishment of speaking activities in English. For this purpose, a Questionnaire is administered where the question types are divided into two major categories: learner-oriented questions aiming at discovering any personal reasons for active participation or failure to take part in the oral activities and methodology-oriented questions aiming at revealing any methodological inappropriateness and deficiency. A total of 36 engineering students were interviewed who anonymously answered a questionnaire about oral communication.

Questions 1 and 2 try to identify the general attitude of the students to the speaking activities in class. All the students agree that oral activities are useful which shows that they are aware of the importance of English in the modern world, and the necessity to develop their communication skills. The reasons they point out for their motivation to enhance their oral skills are related to improving their pronunciation, putting their second language into practice, learning new vocabulary, and because speaking helps them to learn faster and get accustomed to the accent and stress. Hence, creating real life situations is an important aspect of language learning and involving students in oral discussions will equip them with proper skills for both everyday situations and future workplace situations. This is in accord with the syllabus for English language which points out that English is the dominant language of communication throughout the world and it is indispensable for studies, traveling and for social and professional interaction.

Question 3 attempts to look at the opportunities of speaking English outside of class. Normally, most opportunities come from the social networks on the Internet which is the worldwide means of distance communication among people. Some students also mention media and films which prove to be an important source of practicing the language, although not orally. Question 4 aims to reveal the types of problems still existing when students perform speaking activities. Most problems are related to students’ linguistic and discourse competence and must be overcome by the design of need-based materials and learner-oriented approach of teaching.

Question 5 deals with degrees of inhibition some students may exhibit while speaking due
QUESTIONNAIRE

1. I find oral (speaking) activities in class  useful / useless

2. Why do you think it is a good idea to practice oral communication in English?
   1) I learn how to speak English fluently
   2) I become more motivated to learn English
   3) I learn English from listening to my classmates
   4) I become more self-confident
   5) I will need it in the future

3. What opportunities to speak English outside of class do you seek for:
   /Please circle one of the options/
   1) I try to use English when I speak to some of my friends.
   2) I talk in English on the telephone.
   3) I use English in my job.
   4) I use English with e-mail friends.
   5) I use English in discussion groups on the Internet.
   6) I try to engage native speakers I meet in conversation.
   Other (please specify)

4. What kind of problem do you encounter when you do oral (speaking) activities in class?
   /Please circle as many of the options as you find appropriate./
   1) I don’t know enough words.
   2) I don’t know enough grammar.
   3) I don’t have enough preparation for the activities.
   4) I don’t have enough time to plan what I’m going to say.
   5) I don’t have ideas about the topic in Bulgarian.
   6) I don’t want other people to hear me talk in English.
   7) I find the oral activities we do boring.
   8) I think I don’t have any problems at all.
   9) I don’t understand the task instructions.
   10) I never have enough time to complete it.
   11) Others (please specify)

5. Are you afraid of speaking because you may make mistakes?
   /Please circle one of the options/ YES / NO

6. If you don’t know a word in English when you speak, do you
   /Please circle one of the options/
   1) try to explain or paraphrase it with other familiar words?
      never rarely sometimes usually always
   2) use a Bulgarian word instead of English?
      never rarely sometimes usually always
   3) stop communicating at all?
      never rarely sometimes usually always
4) ask a fellow student to help you?  
never rarely sometimes usually always
5) ask the teacher to help you?  
never rarely sometimes usually always
6) others (please specify)

7. Which do you think is the most helpful for a smooth speaking presentation?
   1) pre-taught vocabulary
   2) preliminary study of vocabulary
   3) preparation of the topic in advance
   4) doing vocabulary activities immediately before speaking

8. How important it is for you to improve your speaking skills in English?
   1) extremely important
   2) very important
   3) important
   4) not very important
   5) not important at all

9. What priorities do you attach to the four communication skills: Rank the following from 1-5  
   (1 being the one given the most priority, 5 being the one given the least priority)
   1) listening  1 2 3 4 5
   2) reading  1 2 3 4 5
   3) speaking  1 2 3 4 5
   4) writing  1 2 3 4 5

10. What type of oral (speaking) activities do you prefer?
    /Please circle one of the options/
    1) class discussion
    2) group work
    3) pair work
    4) individual presentation


to mistakes whereas question 6 concerns the existence or the lack of compensation strategies employed during oral performance. Practicing oral communication means how students manage to solve various language problems when their knowledge of English is not enough. In such cases, students should be encouraged to compensate for the words they miss by using strategies, such as reformulating, or using synonyms, questions and body language.

   Question 7 attempts to reveal what language learning strategies the students employ
when they need to speak in the target language. It aims at revealing which teaching method is more effective in ascertaining smooth speaking presentation: pre-taught or preliminary known vocabulary, preparation of the topic in advance or some brainstorming vocabulary activities in class immediately before the students’ presentation.

Questions 8 and 9 concern the importance to the four skills that the students attach in their studies. The aim is to discover whether they find it important and useful to practice speaking in class. Additionally, of vital importance is to identify how they understand the purpose of speaking exercises in the classroom. Moreover, their personal contribution to their own improvement of speaking skills is of paramount interest of this research.

Finally, question 10 deals with students’ preferences with regards to the type of activity assigned, being class discussion, group work, pair work or individual presentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All 36 students find oral (speaking) activities in class useful. Learners who study a foreign language usually think that it is important to be able to speak the target language fluently but in order to be able to communicate orally in English a certain amount of self-esteem and confidence is required. Sometimes it is quite hard to get students to take an active part in discussions and conversations in English. Many of them, despite the fact that they have sufficient English speaking skills, remain silent when practicing oral communication. So a key issue to is to properly motivate students to be orally active in the English classes.

A question which directly gives an insight into students’ motivation to speak in English is why students need to have more speaking practice (Fig. 1). Obviously, most students strive for fluency, while nearly half of them become more motivated this way to learn the language. Also, a great number of students realize the importance of oral skills for their future, be it academic or professional, and use the speaking exercises as a means to improve their oral communication skills and gain more confidence for their future oral performance. The teacher should have the role of facilitator who helps and encourages students to develop their speaking skills by providing them with suitable authentic materials according to the needs of the learners. Thus, along with effective communication skills, students will be given the chance to achieve generic skills, do team work, practice critical thinking and problem solving.

The next question (Fig. 2) tries to establish the other opportunities students seek to use English as genuine means of communication outside of class. Not surprisingly, 60 % of the students use English for communication on the
social networks. Nowadays, learners of English have the chance to communicate with English speakers all over the world via messages, e-mail, chat or communicate orally via, for instance, Messenger, Viber, WhatsApp or Skype. They could also participate in authentic discussion forums on the Internet where, even though some of these types of communication are written, most of them use a form of language that is similar to spoken language. Some 40% of students use English for their jobs and a quarter use it for talking to native speakers. There are several students who use English when travelling to another country and only a very small percentage claim that they rarely use English outside of class. This proves the necessity of teaching oral skills in the English classes as well as the possibility to utilize real life situations as an important aspect of learning the language.

Question 4 (Fig. 3) attempts to reveal the type of problems students encounter in the process of orally practicing the language. The results amount to more than 100% because students could choose as many options as desired. The majority of students think they lack the knowledge of grammar (50%) and vocabulary (40%). Perhaps this is slightly misleading because the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary does not necessarily guarantee fluency of speaking. Practicing oral communication means how students manage to solve various language problems when their knowledge of English is not enough. Therefore, students should be encouraged to compensate for the lack of knowledge by using strategies, such as reformulating, or using synonyms, questions and body language. On the other hand, the lack of grammar and vocabulary may be due to any gaps in preparation which affect the linguistic and discourse competence of students. In order to overcome this problem, students need to be pre-taught

Fig. 4. Results from question 5.

Fig. 5. Results from question 6.
the specialized terminology corresponding to the major subjects they study and they should have more practice to acquire speaking skills to discuss professional issues in the appropriate style.

Other problems students point out are related to the lack of preparation for the activities and the lack of time in class to make a presentation. Unfortunately, students are right to complain for the shortage of time because their number of classes at university is really very limited. Still, some pre-training can be done to make students feel more confident in their oral presentation. After all, the ultimate goal of their practice is to have more opportunity to interact and thus enhance their communicative competence. A small percentage of students (12 %) feel shy to speak before their colleagues but this emotional barrier can be overcome by placing such students in groups with students they feel comfortable with and thus they will feel more relaxed and secure to speak up. Luckily, one third of the students (34 %) do not have problems with oral activities which means they have enough courage and confidence and probably better preparation to complete the communicative tasks.

The next question is related to one of the major problems which is considered as a barrier of speaking – the fear of making mistakes. It is a well-known fact that our emotions, or the affective domain, have a significant impact on foreign language learning. As the analysis of the survey shows, 45 % of students (Fig. 4) are afraid to speak because they might make mistakes. One of the factors of the affective domain is self-esteem which is in direct relation to learner’s willingness to communicate in the target language. Students who study a foreign language usually think that it is important to be able to speak the language. However, the role of the teachers is also of great importance in such situations because they need to establish a safe classroom climate where students’ self-esteem will be stimulated to express themselves in the foreign language. For example, students could be placed in smaller groups with partners they feel secure with. In this respect, Brown points out that foreign language acquisition happens more successfully “in environments where anxiety is low and defensiveness absent” [1]. Moreover, apart from the smaller groups, learners’ motivation to speak in English can be enhanced if the topics of discussion are meaningful to them. They must not view their efforts as artificial, but the meaningfulness should be guaranteed by the use of authentic materials and discussion of questions that are relevant to their area of study.

An attempt was made to establish the existence or the lack of compensation strategies employed during oral performance (Fig. 5). The positive outcome is that 65 % never stop communicating, while other 30% occasionally do it, and only 5 % completely stop when they lack the
necessary vocabulary. This indicates that the majority of students are in possession of mechanisms to either explain or paraphrase the lacking word with other familiar words, or ask a fellow student or the teacher for help. Some 45% sometimes use a Bulgarian word in their speaking, which shows that they feel the artificial nature of their speaking in class and do not bother to interrupt the flow of speech with their native language. This is permissible to some extent at the stage of preparation, but is not adequate at the stage of oral performance. Students should develop an all-round communicative ability and compensate for their lack of language knowledge by using strategies, such as reformulating, or using synonyms, questions and body language. Therefore such students should be given more opportunities to use the language in order to develop fluency. Since language learning is skill-oriented, students should have more opportunities to experiment with the language and practice it.

With reference to the preparation, the next question (Fig. 6) gives an insight into students’ preferences of preparation before giving a talk. Most students find it helpful if they study some vocabulary in advance. A quarter of the students think they would do better if they knew the vocabulary beforehand. Another quarter prefers to do some brainstorming exercises such as puzzles or quizzes in order to warm up before the performance stage. Some 16% would like to have time to prepare on the topic, i.e. to search for some information or to organize their own thoughts in a certain pattern. So, at the preparation stage some methodological changes can be done and some extra materials may be prepared which should be designed in such a way as to make students aware of the vocabulary in advance. This will make them more relaxed at the performance stage and give them more confidence for their presentation.

The importance of improvement of their speaking skills is directly related to the level of motivation of the students. Learning is an active process where in acquiring new knowledge motivation has a decisive influence on the result. Students should feel the increased emphasis on communication in the foreign language classroom where they must take an active part in conversations and learn to express themselves freely. Some authors point out that a reason why this can be hard is the fact that students do not really have a real reason to talk to each other.
and the language classroom many times feels artificial to them. Therefore, in order to get the students to communicate with each other and express themselves freely in the target language it is necessary to use interesting topics, but more importantly the discourse must have a meaningful purpose. Moreover, students must be aware that what they practice and learn in the foreign language classroom is meant to be used outside the classroom situation, in reality. So, those who have realized the better opportunities for finding a job or career development think that speaking well is an indispensable skill (Fig. 8). The other 35% of students also find it important but not as a goal in itself, but as a useful ability in the overall process of communication. Only 10% find that speaking English is not a very important advantage, either because they already have sufficient speaking skills or because they do not use English in their everyday life activities. None of students think that speaking skills are unimportant.

Next students were asked to give different rates to the four communication skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. As we can see from the picture (Fig. 8), speaking is given the highest priority, followed by listening and writing. Though the four skills are independently evaluated, they are rarely taught separately but are rather integrated in various combined activities. Still, the preference for the speaking skills only points out their critical part in communication and hence they should be prioritized in the English language classroom by provoking more discussions and oral communication among students.

In a learner-centred classroom, language teachers should strive for their students to become communicatively competent. In order for this to happen the teacher should encourage the students’ own initiative to express themselves orally in English. In this respect, activities such as group work force learners to talk to each other spontaneously, asking each other questions and responding in a natural way. Therefore, to enhance students’ communication skills, activities such as group discussions, debates, narrations, descriptions, negotiations and presentations on both technical and non-technical topics should be incorporated in the syllabus of engineering students. Also, through group-work students produce not only a greater quantity but also a greater variety of language functions (for example, disagreeing, hypothesizing, requesting, clarifying, and defining). Thus a need-based, learner-centred and fluency-focused syllabus is essential for the development of the communicative competence of students. They should frequently be exposed to English and should be given many opportunities to use the language. Students learn the target language by using it systematically and by experimenting with it on various occasions.

In our survey, when it comes to what are the preferred oral activities, 56% of students choose class discussion (Fig. 9), probably because of the possibility to rely on the others, especially if there are more active students who take the floor. No doubt, group work is the best form of discussion since it allows for developing of team spirit and cooperation. Also, group or pair work is beneficial for shy students who feel uncomfortable to speak in front of large audience. Additionally, working in small groups provides an environment for students to work at their own pace and everybody can take part in the discussion. Individual presentations as chosen by 30% are also preferred by the students because of the longer time of preparation and the possibility to rehearse before speaking.
CONCLUSIONS

The overall aim of this paper is to find out what attitudes engineering students have towards oral communication in the English language classroom. More particularly, why oral communication plays an important part in teaching English as a foreign language and what factors contribute for the motivation of students to actively participate in discussions. The majority of the students are convinced that oral communication is an important part of learning English. It not only helps them to improve their speaking skills but also equips them with knowledge which may be useful for their future career. There are many factors which influence the process, among them students self-esteem, a safe classroom climate, enthusiastic and encouraging teachers, meaningful assignments, small groups, etc., all of which contribute for the increase of students’ motivation to learn. Language learning is a skill-based learning and therefore the more practice is provided, the better the results.

REFERENCES