CY-ICER 2014

Productive skills in second language learning

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Abstract

The paper deals with the area of productive skills when teaching a second/foreign language. The text presents both productive skills such as speaking and writing. One of the goals of the paper is to show what strategies and activities are more successful than the others and how a language type can influence the final outcome. The two observed languages are English as a second/foreign language and Czech as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

In this paper much attention will be paid mainly to one category of language skills and those are productive skills. There are two groups of skills that are known and studied in the context of educational process represented by teaching and learning. The category of receptive skills - also recognized as passive skills – is demonstrated by reading and listening. In many cases of foreign language learning they appear as the first skills to be understood and comprehended. Foreign language learners mostly start their way of mastering a new language by observing, reading and collecting language experience. Passive language skills do not force students to produce anything actively. They

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gain the knowledge in a passive manner and later they start producing their own monologues, dialogues and many other "spoken results" are created. The same process is done with writing which the same way as speaking belongs to the category of productive language skills, also described as active skills. More energy is needed to ´produce´ any outcome of those types. Both types of language skills make an integral part of learning process at any stage of its development.

At first the paper will describe different strategies how both speaking skills are taught and it will present examples of more and less successful activities when learning not only English as a second/foreign language, abbreviated ESL/EFL. As Littlewood explains " a ´second´ language has social functions within the community where it is learnt, whereas a ´foreign´ language is learnt primarily for contact outside one´s community" (Littlewood, 1991, p.2). The article itself will concentrate more on the process of learning than teaching. There are various factors that influence the final outcome and success in grasping a foreign/second language. We will look at potential users of a new language and try to answer why some of them are more successful than the others. One of the final paragraphs will deal with the basic characteristics of Czech as a foreign language. It will underline the authors´ own experience with teaching this language of a small nation to a heterogeneous group of students.

2.   Productive skills, their description and basic features

When one starts learning a foreign language, he surely and subconsciously is exposed to both categories of language skill. As mentioned before, productive skills - also called active skills - mean the transmission of information that a language user produces in either spoken or written form. Productive skills would not exist without the support of receptive ones. Passive knowledge - such as listening and reading - symbolises a springboard to active implementation of grammar structures, passive vocabulary lists, heard and repeated sounds of a foreign language. This theoretical background applies to any studied language. This should also prove that both types of skills are inseparable and one cannot exist without the other. When learning a foreign language, receptive skills usually come first and should be followed by practical application of productive ones. If a learning process lacks one of them, the final outcome will not be complete.

As most active users of any foreign language know, speaking and writing are in reciprocal relationship.

Undoubtedly, grammatical structures, words and their proper use, and certain extent of accuracy need to be respected. These are implemented in both types of active skills. As Riggenbach and Lazaraton point out, rather than implementing activities that concentrate attention strictly to accuracy, plenty of language instructors focus on promoting communicative competence in language students by applying "communicative activities" (Riggenbach & Lazaraton, 1991, p.125). The classroom environment and atmosphere definitely create necessary part of successful teaching and learning. These are highly valued by the learners. Creative teachers, who do not want to let their learners to get bored, work with a wide scope of speaking and writing activities. For the teaching purpose, not only lesson plan but also a term syllabus need to be created beforehand. More experienced language instructors bear in mind that students´ responses to needs analysis forms bring valuable pieces of information for setting up the core of the language course plan. The content of such a plan should include some general activities, but there also should be a set of tailor-made exercises that suit the specific group of learners and where particular objectives are set. This aspect of selected activities will be dealt with later in the paper.

As Olshtain and Cohen state (Olshtain & Cohen, 1991, p.154),"if we wish to master another language we need to become more communicatively competent". Their observation proves the idea that language accuracy is necessary but not the most vital feature of speaking activities. To organize the lesson effectively a wide range of diverse activities should be involved in the lesson plan. Examples of speaking activities that are listed in the "speaking menu" are organized from least to most difficult ones. As mentioned above, some grammatical structures and vocabulary are incorporated in order to suit the content to less homogeneous group of course participants and guide them towards the same or similar outcome.

The teaching experience and long-term observation bring us a long register of activities and exercises in order to practice productive skills effectively. Speaking proves to be one of the main goals when learning English or any other language as a foreign language. There are favourite activities that are considered to be suitable even for learners- beginners. To name a few and prove that speaking and writing are in mutual relationship we can start with writing or enumerating a list of words linked with a certain topic, and/or writing and simultaneous using of everyday phrases in short face to face conversation exchanges, role-play telephone conversations and picture games in the ESL/EFL classrooms. At this early stage of learning some learners enjoy keeping their personal diaries, some