A COMMUNICATIVE VIEW TOWARDS THE TEACHING OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES AND FUNCTIONS.

UMA VISÃO COMUNICATIVA PARA O ENSINO DA LÍNGUA FALADA: CARACTERÍSTICAS DISTINTIVAS E FUNÇÕES.

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Abstract: The present paper intends to provide a brief view about the distinctive features of spoken language, the different functions it performs in everyday communication and how these elements must be considered for the creation, implementation and assessment of speaking activities from a communicative perspective. It takes as starting point the priority learners give to this skill when learning a foreign language and the challenge it represents for teachers to fulfill the students’ expectations regarding its successful acquisition because of its complex nature. From there, the article moves to the analysis of the main characteristics and functions of spoken language, emphasizing on the elements the students should master to use speaking skills for different purposes and the demands they entail for teachers to plan, conduct and evaluate communicative speaking activities. Afterwards, there is a short reference to the specific case of higher education, due to the important role of English in the students’ academic and professional formation and the growing need to use spoken language to interact within their academic and scientific environments. Finally, the paper highlights the necessity of following a communicative methodology when using speaking activities and points out some of the conditions they should
meet in order to maximize speaking opportunities and stimulate learners’
autonomy while learning the language. The article relies on theoretical
contributions provided by several authors who have developed important
studies in this field. Such are the cases of Byrne (1986), Brown and Yule
(1989), Lavery (2001), Thornbury (2005), Penny Ur (1996); (2011) and
Richards (2006); (2008).

Keywords: Spoken language, functions, speaking activities.

Resumo - O presente artigo objetiva apresentar uma breve visão sobre as
características distintivas da língua falada, as diferentes funções que
desempenha na comunicação cotidiana e como esses elementos devem ser
considerados para a criação, implementação e avaliação de atividades orais
a partir de uma perspectiva comunicativa. Toma-se como ponto de partida a
prioridade que os alunos oferecem a essa habilidade quando aprendem
uma língua estrangeira e o desafio que representa para os professores
satisfazer as expectativas dos alunos no relativo a sua aquisição bem
sucedida por causa da natureza complexa da fala. A partir daí, o artigo
passa a analisar as principais características e funções da língua falada,
enfatizando os elementos que os alunos devem dominar para usar as
habilidades orais para diferentes fins e as demandas que elas exigem dos
professores ao planejar, conduzir e avaliar as atividades comunicativas para
desenvolver essa habilidade. Em seguida, há uma breve referência ao caso
específico do ensino superior, devido ao importante papel do inglês na
formação acadêmica e profissional dos alunos e à crescente necessidade
de usar a linguagem oral para interagir em seus ambientes acadêmicos e
científicos. Finalmente, o artigo destaca a necessidade de seguir uma
metodologia comunicativa na utilização das atividades orais e destaca
algumas das condições a serem atendidas para maximizar as
oportunidades de fala e estimular a autonomia dos estudantes enquanto
aprendem a língua. Pra fazer isso, o artigo se baseia nas contribuições
teóricas fornecidas por vários autores que desenvolveram importantes
estudos nesse campo. Tais são os casos de Byrne (1986), Brown e Yule
Richards (2006); (2008).

Palavras-chave: Língua falada, funções, atividades orais.
Introduction

Speaking skills constitute a priority for many foreign language learners, who frequently measure their progress in language acquisition based on the level of spoken language proficiency they have achieved (RICHARDS, 2008).

This statement finds additional support in the words of Penny Ur (1996, p.120) when she states:

"Of all the four skills (...) speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language are referred to as 'speakers' of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowings and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak".

However, as Brown and Yule (1989) recognize, speaking usually represents one of the most difficult elements of language learning for teachers to help students with. They support this statement on account of the fact that, unlike written production where each writer can work independently at his own pace without distracting the rest of the class, in speech production the speaker addresses someone who is supposed to listen to what he says and respond to him accordingly. The noise caused by this kind of interaction may interfere with the work of other students and therefore it will require the teacher to find a suitable solution to cope with this sort of situations (BROWN AND YULE, 1989).

Due to the importance and complexity involved in teaching this skill, in the next pages we will analyze some of its distinctive features, taking as the basis the points of view of several authors who have approached the topic. This analysis will allow us to have a better understanding of the elements that must be considered when planning and teaching speaking lessons.

Distinctive features of spoken language

Byrne (1986), states that oral communication is a bilateral process between speaker and listener, having both important functions to perform. On the one hand, the speaker has to elaborate the message he wishes to communicate in appropriate language while, on the other, the listener has to interpret it with the help of stress, intonation as well as facial movements and gestures. In his words, the main goal in
teaching speaking will be oral fluency, which he defines as the ability to express oneself intelligibly, reasonably accurately and without too much hesitation.

This author comments that speech is often characterized by incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical utterances, frequent false starts and repetitions. He also points out that speaking involves responding to what has been heard, a fact that is conditioned by the constant exchange of roles between speaker and listener during the course of a conversation.

Brown and Yule (1989) refer that most spoken language consists of unsubordinated phrases related to each other, not so much by the syntax as by the way the speaker says them. They sustain that it is syntactically very much simpler than written language and the vocabulary is usually much less specific. They also note that this kind of language is characterized by incomplete sentences, by the use of general non-specific words and phrases and interactive expressions. They explain that the speaker uses the resources of pausing, rhythm and intonation to mark out for the listener which parts of his speech need to be co-interpreted.

Lavery (2001) claims that speaking a language demands a correct use of language components including pronunciation, vocabulary and grammatical structures, which will require linguistic accuracy practice. At the same time, she notes the importance of transmitting a clear message across selecting appropriate ideas for different communicative situations, which will involve fluency practice. She also highlights the importance of being a good listener, using listener tactics to show interest in the conversation.

Luoma (2004, cited by Richards, 2008, p. 19) points out that spoken discourse is composed of conjoined short phrases and clauses. She outlines that it may be planned or unplanned, employs more generic words than written language, as well as fixed phrases, fillers, and hesitation markers. She also argues that it contains slips and errors reflecting online processing, involves reciprocity, shows variation and reflects speakers’ role, purpose and context.

Thornbury (2005) reports that speech production takes place in real time and is therefore essentially linear, with a great deal of spontaneity, being the planning time severely limited. In his opinion, speakers produce speech through conceptualizing, formulating, and articulating and during this process they will also be self-monitoring, attending to their interlocutors, adjusting their message accordingly and negotiating the management of conversational turns. He also remarks that in
order that these processes are optimally realized, they will need to master linguistic factors (including discourse knowledge, speech act knowledge and knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and phonology) and extralinguistic ones (such as background knowledge of topic and culture).

Penny Ur (2011) observes that spoken language is very often constructed in collaboration with an interlocutor; it displays a range of grammatical features, which include aspects such as the use of coordination of sentences rather than subordination, grammatical reduction, and great number of colloquial lexicogrammatical chunks, many of them fillers or expressions of vagueness. She outlines that many of these features are mainly used in informal registers of any natural language and will tend to appear in learners’ speech even if they are not deliberately taught.

These considerations lead us to the conclusion that speaking a foreign language implies an interaction between speaker and listener, where the former makes use of different linguistic and extra linguistic components in order to transmit a message in a clear, fluent and coherent way so as to be interpreted by the latter. To achieve these objectives, they need to produce and understand utterances in different sociolinguistic contexts, negotiating turns and using communicative strategies to guarantee the continuous progress of communication.

As for the features of spoken language, we may conclude that it is characterized by the use of incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical utterances with frequent false starts and repetitions. It includes the use of general non-specific words, phrases and interactive expressions and involves spontaneity, reciprocity and variation.

These theoretical contributions place us in a better position to understand the complex nature of spoken language taking into consideration the variety of elements students should master in order to achieve successful oral communication. It starts with the knowledge and correct use of several formal aspects of the language such as grammar, vocabulary, intonation, stress, rhythm and pronunciation; followed by the capacity to integrate those elements within a context to elaborate and express, in real time, coherent and fluent ideas that meet the requirements of a given communicative situation. In addition, they need to develop interactional competence in handling conversational turns and topic management, reacting to what other
people say using comprehension checks and feedback expressions to show interest, express surprise, concern, sympathy, agreement or disagreement, etcetera.

The above stated leads us to conclude that the teacher will have to devote a high proportion of class time to develop speaking skills, creating the best conditions for the students to use the language for a variety of communicative purposes, which will require a careful preparation, selection and presentation of topics and activities (BYRNE, 1986).

In doing so, he will have to consider some other important aspects of spoken language such as the different functions it performs in daily communication and the variety of purposes for which students need speaking skills (RICHARDS, 2008).

**Functions of spoken language**

Spoken language is often classified considering two main functions: interactional and transactional. In order to deepen into their specific characteristics, identify the differences between them and analyze their pedagogical implications for planning, implementing and evaluating speaking activities, next we will take a glance at some theoretical reflections offered by authors like Brown and Yule (1989) and Richards (2008) on this respect.

Brown and Yule (1989) refer that interactional language is primarily listener oriented and its main concern is the maintenance of social relationships. They emphasize that interactional chats are frequently characterized by constantly shifting topics and a great deal of agreement on them. They also note that in such conversations speakers do not challenge each other, argue or require repetition of something that the other person has said, since they usually end up feeling comfortable and friendly with each other. They refer that examples of this kind of interactions are people meeting on a bus or train for the first time, at parties, at the beginning of a new lecture course, among others.

Regarding transactional language, they report that it is primarily message oriented, since its main concern is the effective transference of information. They agree that it is characterized by structured long turns, which are considerably more demanding than short turns, because the speaker takes the responsibility for creating a structured sequence of utterances that must help the listener create a coherent
mental representation of what he is trying to say. Therefore, successful transactional speech often involves more use of specific vocabulary. As examples of these kinds of talks, they mention telling anecdotes, jokes, explaining how something works, justifying a position and making descriptions (BROWN AND YULE, 1989).

Richards (2008) uses a three-part version of Brown and Yule’s classification of oral language. He refers to talk as interaction, talk as transaction and talk as performance. Based on this assumption, he provides examples of each kind of talk and mentions some of the necessary skills to develop while using them.

This author declares that talk as interaction refers to what we normally mean by “conversation” and describes interaction that serves a primarily social function. He notes that in these kinds of conversations, the focus is more on the speakers and how they wish to present themselves to each other than on the message. He also observes that such exchanges may be either casual or more formal, depending on the circumstances (RICHARDS, 2008).

When providing examples of this kind of talk, Richards includes polite conversations, which do not seek to develop future social relationships (as in the case of adjacent passengers during a plane flight), casual conversations that serve to mark an ongoing friendship (as those chats between school friends over coffee), polite conversations reflecting unequal power between the two participants (as in the case of a student chatting to his or her professor while waiting for an elevator), or those in which people share personal recounts (like telling a friend about an amusing experience, and hearing him or her recount a similar experience he or she once had). Concerning the necessary skills involved in using this kind of talk, he highlights the cases of opening and closing conversations, choosing topics, making small-talk, joking, recounting personal incidents and experiences, turn-taking, using adjacency pairs, interrupting, reacting to others, using an appropriate style of speaking, and so on (RICHARDS, 2008).

Regarding the best ways to teach this language function, Richards advises the use of naturalistic dialogs that serve as a model of the features mentioned above. After giving the models, he recommends to provide situations in which small talk might be appropriate (like meeting someone at a movie, running into a friend in the cafeteria, or waiting at a bus stop) and then ask students to think of small talk topic comments and responses.
In the case of talk as transaction this author asserts that its main features are the facts that it has a primarily information focus, it is centered on the message and not on the participants, speakers employ communication strategies to make themselves understood, there may be frequent questions, repetitions, and comprehension checks as well as negotiation and digression. He finally remarks that linguistic accuracy is not always important (RICHARDS, 2008).

According to this author, some examples of talk as transaction are the cases of obtaining information (about a flight), asking someone for directions (on the street), buying something (in a shop), ordering food (from a menu in a restaurant), discussing plans or certain topics, among others. In his opinion, some of the skills involved in using talk for transactions are explaining a need or intention, describing something, asking questions, asking for clarification, confirming information, justifying an opinion, making suggestions, clarifying understanding, making comparisons, agreeing and disagreeing and so on (RICHARDS, 2008).

As for the ways of teaching students how to use talk for sharing and obtaining information, as well as for carrying out real-world transactions, Richards proposes group activities, information-gap activities and role-plays.

In line with these considerations, we may conclude that the interactional function of spoken language is oriented towards the listener, since its main objective is to establish social relationships among the speakers. It is characterized by short answers used to produce short turns. Most of these conversations include a great amount of personal opinions provided by one of the participants, which is agreed by the other. These conversations are usually developed by means of friendly interactions.

Examples of this kind of talk could be recreated in speaking lessons using activities that simulate real life situations such as some types of dialogues and role-plays. Two facts to consider here are the sociolinguistic and strategic components (Canale and Swain, 1980), where the setting, communicative situation, relationships among the participants and purpose of the conversation are important, as well as the development of communicative strategies to avoid conversational breakdowns.

The transactional function, on the other hand, makes emphasis on the transmission of information in a clear and effective way. It is characterized by long turns, which are more difficult for the speakers to produce than short turns because
the message must be correctly structured in order to create in the listener a precise mental image of what is being said.

It can therefore be assumed that besides paying attention to the necessary linguistic and sociolinguistic elements involved in using this kind of talk, in order to enable students to produce such well-structured long turns, the teacher will need to pay special attention to the discourse and strategic competences (Canale, 1983). This will allow students to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken text with the use of verbal and non-verbal strategies to compensate for breakdowns in communication.

Considering the relevance that information acquires for the development of this kind of language function, it is advisable to include information gap activities (Richards, 2006) so that classroom language practice allows students to use linguistic contents, skills and strategies to provide and ask for necessary information, negotiate meanings and engage in meaningful interpersonal exchange.

The considerations mentioned above are quite useful in order to shed some light on the elements that need to be prioritized while teaching speaking. Knowing the specific skills the students need to master in order to use each type of function, will allow teachers to identify the best strategies to teach each kind of talk (Richards, 2008), and to grade tasks in terms of difficulty (Brown and Yule, 1989). On these grounds, teachers will be able to determine the expected level of performance on a speaking task and the criteria that will be used to assess student performance (RICHARDS, 2008).

Having analyzed the main features of interactional and transactional functions of spoken language, a logical deduction would be that, when teaching this ability, the use of interactional language should be considered at the early stages, along with communicative functions that require a basic knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures. This will only demand from students the ability to communicate using short turns to establish and maintain friendly relationships with their classmates.

While this might seem to be a good result at the primary phases of learning a foreign language, if the students get used to just using this kind of function, it will be really difficult for them to produce long turns to provide and ask for necessary information. Besides, we as teachers would be denying their possibilities to reach
higher levels of development in the use of the foreign language for real communicational purposes.

Brown and Yule (1989) explain that students who are just able to produce short turns will be frustrated when trying to speak the foreign language because, even when they may have acquired basic interactional skills and may have the language structures available, they will be very far from using the language to express themselves.

In this respect, they emphasize:

(…) “the syllabus which results from taking seriously an expression like 'enabling the speaker to express himself', must surely go beyond short turns and consider what it would mean for a speaker to be responsible for the structure of a long turn (…)” (BROWN AND YULE, 1989, p. 27, 28).

The case of higher education

It can be argued then that, in the case of higher education, along with the basic communicative functions mentioned above, students will need to learn other skills and communicative functions, which permit them to carry out some academic activities such as making oral presentations, participating in lectures, seminars, workshops, discussions, and so forth.

Such requirements lead us to the analysis of the third function of spoken language proposed by Richards; talk as performance.

He explains that this kind of talk is used to transmit information before an audience, as in the case of classroom presentations, public announcements and speeches, and it is often evaluated according to its effectiveness or impact on the listener. As the main features of talk as performance, he lists that there is a focus on both message and audience, it has a predictable organization and sequencing, form and accuracy are equally important, the language used is more like written language and it usually follows a monologic organization. Presenting information in an appropriate sequence, using an appropriate opening and closing, maintaining audience engagement, using an appropriate format, a correct pronunciation and grammar as well as an appropriate vocabulary, are some of the skills he considers necessary for using this language function (RICHARDS, 2008).

Richards (2008) points out that teaching this kind of talk involves providing examples or models through video or audio recordings or written examples to be
then analyzed in terms of linguistic and organizational features. He outlines that important factors to be considered in this regard, are the speaker’s purpose, the knowledge of the audience, the kind of information expected, the speech sequence, the stages involved, as well as the language used.

It becomes obvious that in order to master the above mentioned abilities, the students need background knowledge of the language that enables them to perform tasks of such level of complexity. This means that before introducing this kind of speech activity, the teacher must be sure the students have reached a certain level of proficiency, which allows them to use the language for interactional purposes and for the exchange of information.

Therefore, teaching must be graded in such a way that we can bring the students from the stage where they are mainly imitating a model of some kind, to the point where they can use the language freely to express their own ideas (BYRNE, 1986).

This kind of teaching, centered on the students’ needs and interests, demands the use of an alternative approach to grammatical methods, which have dominated English syllabuses for several years and continue to be applied in many educational systems. Here is that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) can play an important role in the teaching of speaking skills.

**Speaking activities in the light of Communicative Language Teaching**

The essence of CLT is to develop the students’ communicative competence through engaging them in communication (Savignon, 2007). This competence includes some aspects of language knowledge like using language for a range of different purposes and functions, varying its use according to the setting and participants, being able to produce and understand different types of texts as well as maintaining communication despite having limitations in one’s language knowledge (RICHARDS, 2006).

These elements will be best acquired when the students are prompted to use the foreign language within the classroom as a real communication tool. This implies the use of activities that encourage their need to communicate and provide
opportunities to share their own ideas and opinions, becoming the center of the learning process.

In the particular case of speaking activities, there are some elements pointed out by different authors, which require attention for their planning, administration and evaluation.

Regarding the characteristics of a successful speaking activity, Penny Ur (1996) states that most of the planning time must be devoted to guarantee learners’ talk, making sure they all have the same opportunities to participate and contribute to the discussion. She also highlights that these activities should encourage students’ motivation by means of presenting interesting topics or through the inclusion of objectives that students want to achieve. She finally advises that the language to be included must be of an acceptable level, so that students are able to express themselves through relevant, and easily comprehensible utterances with an acceptable level of language accuracy.

Thornbury (2005) considers that there are some conditions oral activities must meet in order to maximize speaking opportunities and learners’ autonomy. Among them, he mentions that they must be productive in terms of language use and should encourage participation of all students to achieve a common purpose through language interaction. He explains that the students must be challenged by the task but must also feel safe to interact with their classmates in a supportive classroom where making mistakes is seen as a natural part of learning the language. Finally, he calls for task authenticity in terms of relation to real life communication.

Lavary (2001) advises to provide students with tasks where they have to communicate with others in pairs or groups to exchange information, preferably about themselves, using different language varieties. She notes that teachers need to consider a balance between accuracy and fluency, showing interest in what the students say and how well structured it is. She also points out the importance of encouraging them to use verbal signs of interest about the information they receive from their classmates. Finally, she highlights the importance of aiming for student participation from the very start of lessons and expresses the need to prepare them for the unpredictable nature of real communication using information gap activities.

On the bases of the above considered by the authors cited regarding speaking activities, there are some important points to highlight. The first one is the fact that they should be mainly organized in pairs or groups in order to provide opportunities
for student interaction and create a communicative environment in the classroom that allows the negotiation of meanings and the exchange of information among the students. In this process, they will be able to express their own opinions about different topics of interest using the foreign language, they will also be encouraged to correct their peers’ mistakes and become aware of their own as they are also corrected by their classmates.

In this respect, Richards (2006) argues that through completing pair work or group work activities, learners will obtain several benefits such as learning from hearing the language used by other members of the group, increasing their motivational level, having the chance to develop fluency and produce a greater amount of language than they would use in teacher-fronted activities.

The second element to consider is that speaking activities should encourage language autonomy and therefore they must be levelled in terms of complexity to achieve the students’ gradual development in language proficiency. They must be conceived in such a way that students’ participation is guaranteed from the very beginning, even at the early stages, using the linguistic contents they have learned to interact with their classmates by means of the foreign language. In this sense, the teacher must provide whatever help they might need to achieve higher levels of independence, up to the point where they are able to express their own ideas freely.

The third aspect to be pointed out is that, in order to make those activities communicative, the notion of information gap should be incorporated from the very moment they are planned. This will contribute to the real exchange of relevant and meaningful information among students and authentic communication will take place within the classroom.

Regarding this need, Brown and Yule (1989, p. 34) state:

(…) “It is helpful for the speaker if he has information which the listener does not have but which the listener, for some reason, needs”.

Another factor to acknowledge when conceiving speaking activities from a communicative perspective is the need for a new type of teacher’s role. It will demand from the teacher the selection and inclusion of relevant and meaningful topics, which should be graded according to the students’ level of proficiency. Additionally, it will involve the use of authentic materials including audio and video sequences with models for the students to get in contact with the features of natural
spoken language, as used by native speakers. It will also include a new attitude towards errors, viewing them not as a finished product or result in terms of students’ language acquisition, but as a natural and important part of the learning process and a source of knowledge that will lead to the gradual development of their communicative competence.

Among the activities suggested by different authors to develop speaking skills (Byrne, 1986); (Ur, 1996); (Lavary, 2001); (Thornbury, 2005); (Richards, 2008) are: mini-dialogues, simulated or authentic dialogues, questionnaires and quizzes, decision making activities, drama activities including role plays and simulations, language games, problem solving activities, discussions and debates, presentations and talks, jigsaw activities, telling stories, jokes and anecdotes, among others.

These activities make different types of demands on learners and therefore they require different levels of preparation and support (Richards, 2008). This suggests that their selection, implementation and assessment will depend, to a large extent, on the specific characteristics of the students, their learning styles, needs and interests.

**Conclusions**

Spoken language is considered one of the most important skills for students who learn a foreign language and, at the same time, one of the most difficult ones for teachers to deal with in the classroom. It demands from the students, along with the ability to express spontaneous, coherent and fluent ideas in different sociolinguistic contexts, the capacity to understand what other people say and react to it using feedback expressions to show interest and keep the course of a conversation. For this reason, the conception of speaking lessons must start with a careful preparation, selection and presentation of activities based on the students’ needs and interests, creating the best conditions for them to use the language for a variety of communicative purposes and situations.

These purposes and situations include using the language for social interactions, for exchanging important information and performing some other
specific tasks like transmitting information before an audience. Each of these language functions will require a different teaching strategy and their treatment will imply different demands for students. Therefore, teaching must be graded so as to encourage the students’ gradual progress in the development of their communicative competence, favouring a transition which starts with the use of simple short turns at early stages, up to the point where they are able to manage long turns to express their own ideas and opinions to fit a given communicative situation. In this regard, it is important to conduct speaking activities where there is a balance between the communicative functions that have as a center the establishment of social relationships and those aiming at the exchange of information.

Such activities must encourage actual communication within the classroom, recreating real life situations so that students can interact orally in English with their classmates, working in pairs and groups, negotiating meanings, sharing ideas and opinions. In this process, they will gradually acquire language autonomy as they practice the linguistic contents in a communicative atmosphere and, at the same time, will develop necessary skills, strategies and competences in the foreign language, which will then be applied in other contexts and situations of their sociocultural environment.

References


