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Discussion forum (course) – a practical approach to communicative competence development

Tatiana Hrivíková: Vitafórum (kurzus) – a kommunikatív kompetencia fejlesztésének gyakorlati megközelítése

Összefoglaló

A tanulmány leírja egy speciális angol nyelvi kurzus, a „vitafórum” megfigyeléseit és eredményeit az Idegen Nyelvek és az Interkulturális Kommunikáció program keretében a Pozsonyi Közgazdasági Egyetemen, az Alkalmazott Nyelvek Karán. A kurzus az eredeti formájában folyik, úgy ahogy 2010-ben bevezették és akkreditálták és a fejlesztésekor figyelembe vették mind a hallgatók, mind a tanárok tapasztalatait. Három vitaformát tárgyal a tanulmány: a vita párbajt, a kerekasztalt és a csapat vitát és értékeli gyenge pontjaikat és előnyeiket. Végül bemutatja a kurzus bevezetése óta elért eredményeket és ismerteti a levont következtetéseket.

Kulcsszavak: *vita, vita párbaj, kerekasztal, csapat vita, érv és ellenérv*

ABSTRACT

The paper describes and discusses the observations and findings of three years of teaching a unique English language course – “Discussion Forum” within the study programme Foreign Languages and Intercultural Communication at the Faculty of Applied Languages, at the University of Economics in Bratislava. It presents the original format as it was introduced in 2010 when the study programme was accredited and its development and alterations based on the collected experience and evidence of both students and teacher. Three debate formats, speech duel, round table and team debate, are described and their shortcomings and merits are evaluated. Finally, the findings and conclusions arrived at since the first implementation, are discussed.

Key words: debate, speech duel, round table, team debate, argument and refutation

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the paper is to present the empirical results of three years of teaching a specialized course ‘Discussion forum in English’ which focuses on the development of communicative competence of students. The necessity of such practical courses has been validated by a constant pressure of the globalized public audience on improvement of communication among individuals, various partners, companies but countries and cultures too.

While at school, foreign language courses can provide excellent environment for facilitation of both communicative and (inter)cultural competences. We have become more interconnected and even more interdependent globally. Therefore it has become paramount for each and every individual to develop their communicative and intercultural competences utilising the time spent by formal education or by any other available means because the ties that link us all are founded and dependent among others on effective communication within and across various cultural discourses. Indeed, individuals as discrete identities need to communicate to a

much larger extent than it used to be the practice previously.

As English language is often used as a 'lingua franca' in communication across cultures, it is important to offer the students opportunities to facilitate specific skills profitable in multiple contexts. "Discussion forum in English" is a specialised course focused on developing speaking skills as one of the four basic skills needed for successful communication together with facilitation of communicative competences. The featured course is part of the Master's degree study program (Adamcová, 2009). By then, the students will have completed their bachelor's degree and received appropriate training in various areas of language, communication and culture. They will have acquired experience with practicing various forms of speaking; they worked in pairs or small groups, they practiced interrogative forms of communication where the teacher asks questions and students are expected to answer them in a specific manner; they will have had experience in preparing and giving presentations in both their native and foreign language, and last but not least, defending their bachelor thesis. Some students may have even experience with some form of job interviews.

The presented course specializes in forms of oral communication different from their previous experience; namely in speech duels, round tables and competitive team debates. To make the students acquainted with each proposed form we need to draw their attention towards both similarities and specific features of each form and let them develop their own strategies for active participation in those.

BASICS

The training starts with brainstorming and compilation of skills that the students need to utilize at the preparatory and main stage of the various forms of debates and for active participation in them. Brainstorming is an appropriate form of activity for the task as students have to contemplate the processes and how they would carry out the specific tasks

required by the particular stages of the tasks at hand. A teacher's guide to debate programmes (MSPDP, 2002) lists the following skills involved in the preparatory stage:

- Research competence
- Media literacy
- Reading comprehension
- Argument literacy
- Evidence evaluation
- Summarising
- Public speaking
- Floor management & civility
- *Time management* (author's addition)

Developing each of the skills appearing on the list may prove useful not only for their further studies but they could be valuable for their future careers as well. We consider time management a valuable addition to the list as students do not have much experience with organising their speeches in a strictly limited time limit. Initially, they find it quite difficult to speak continuously and fluently for a given time period even about topics they are quite familiar with. Practice of very short individual speeches is then very useful and usually interesting for the students. Another round of brainstorming leads to the establishment of some general rules of debates, such as:

- Politeness
- Objectivity
- Turn taking
- Active listening
- Questioning arguments not people
- Respect for different opinions
- Reasoning not emotions
- Argumentation not arguing

ARGUMENT AND REFUTATION PRACTICE

Coming to realise what skills and rules are involved in the process, the students need to be trained how to construct valid and true arguments. Otherwise they are only putting forward unsupported opinions. To be able to prove one's right, speakers need to present arguments in favour of their position. Argument can be defined among others as "a reason given in proof" or "discourse intended to persuade"

(Merriam-Webster, 2008). To achieve the goal of proving one's truth, the argument needs to be logical and objective, possibly supported by data or some reliable authority. An argument can be divided into three elementary parts. The first one is an assertion or claim - a statement one wants to prove as truthful. The assertion should be followed by reasoning which explains why the claim is truthful and finally comes the evidence which offers some hard data or a practical example of common knowledge (Brilhart, 2003).

The students need to practise the process of constructing valid arguments before starting the actual debates because then they are able to focus their attention on both preparing their own arguments and noticing any logical mistakes and loopholes in the arguments of their opponents. The training can be carried out through gap filling tasks where the missing parts of the arguments are filled in, various alternatives are evaluated and logical errors can be corrected in pairs and groups.

Nevertheless a true debate cannot develop without a direct confrontation of attitudes. It is not enough to express one's disagreement with the position of the opponent; more is needed in the form of clash of ideas. To achieve that stage it is necessary for both parties to listen carefully for the arguments of their opponents and answer them. That is called refutation.

Refutation again, requires previous consideration and lot of practice as it is sometimes difficult to recognise the weak point of an argument. One has to listen carefully and come up with a good counter-argument. A refutation or counter-argument has four phases; it starts with the summary of the claim to be refuted, then it is followed by a counter-claim which pronounces the claim invalid, false or irrelevant. The third stage adds reasoning to the counter-claim, and the refutation is completed by the final dismissal of the refuted argument and explanation why the counter-argument is better than the refuted one. Refutation practice can be carried out as a follow-up activity of argumentation, when one by one each argument is refuted and deflected by the students. As the period of initial training

may seem to be too static for the students, it can be complemented by practising short 1 or 2-minute free motion speeches for the development of self-confidence, time management and argumentation.

SPEECH DUELS

The initial practice of argument, refutation and short speech time management lead the students towards the first true debate form – to speech duels. The students start with unengaged duels i.e. they speak in support or against the stated motion but without refuting the arguments of their dueller for three minutes. The audience listens to their speeches, asks questions and finally votes for a more persuasive speaker. After mastering the format the students can approach the engaged form where after a three-minute speech both duellers have two minutes to refute some of their opponent's arguments. Again the decision about the winner lies in the hands of the rest of the students who need to listen carefully to both speeches and refutations to be able to ask questions and come to a conclusion. The advantage of the speech duels is their novelty as a form of language practice but at the same time it is familiar from everyday experience when one is often engaged in disputes with friends, family members and now they can learn how to do it without becoming over-emotional and personal. They practice how to win with arguments rather than strength of voice or personal attacks. The disadvantage of that format may be the lack of support from others as the duellers have to weather the duel on their own.

ROUND TABLE

The second form of debate that is practiced within the course is the round table which can have two basic variations; either a chaired discussion with an appointed host to manage the flow of the debate or a looser form without a chairperson where the participants have to present their self-management skills and

everybody is equally responsible for the progress.

Round tables are seemingly easier because the debate is usually less stressful without stated time limits but there are other difficulties the participants need to face. First of all, they have to take the initiative if possible, especially in the case of no appointed chairperson. The one who talks first can actually direct the debate and thus increase his/her chances to assert one's position. The speakers have to listen very carefully for appropriate moments and clues when to join in and refute arguments they disagree with and present their own ones. Very important aspect is personal time management because everybody has to have a chance to speak up. Therefore, prolonged monologues are inappropriate and provoke inadequate interruptions and increased emotions. The audience also watches and compares the behaviour of each participant and develops opinions based on both their arguments and non-verbal communication. This form of debate is greatly dependent on polite and considerate exchange of views with the aim to express one's position supported by valid arguments rather than defeating the opposition. In addition, in this form of debate everybody stands alone and carries full responsibility for success or failure. This form of debate practice is usually welcome by more introvert, more thoughtful students who do not like the pressure of competition. The reason we use the format is because it is desirable to change the pace of the lessons from time to time, to meet the needs of the more timid students and to familiarise all the students with a wider range of formats.

COMPETITIVE TEAM DEBATE

The last format introduced in the course is the competitive team debate. Those debates are a very dynamic form of discussion as their important aspect is rivalry and "competition for truth"; though it is not the absolute kind of truth that is looked for. It is more about two parties trying to prove their right and an

attempt to persuade others about it. The debate is limited by time and specific roles are allocated to the three team members. One team upholds a motion, while the other opposes it. The debate is started by the first member of the proposition team who presents arguments in favour of the motion within his/her granted 5 minutes. If the other team wishes to comment on what they hear, they can ask for a point of information which can be accepted or refused by the speaker. If granted, only a short remark or a question can be posed and the speaker usually reacts briefly. After the time limit is used up, the opposition team's first speaker takes the floor and presents arguments against the motion in his/her allocated 5 minutes. But besides listing a set of arguments the speaker has to attempt to refute the arguments of the proposition team.

The second members of both teams have equally 5 minutes at their disposal and their role is to develop the arguments of their team partner and refute the arguments of the opponent team. Finally, the third team member's role is to rebut the position of their team in the 3 minutes available and eventually make a final impression trying to win the favour of the audience (Division, 2002).

The audience is entrusted with an important and active role. Their role is to watch and follow the debate in a flowchart, to note all the mentioned arguments and their refutation. Based on their notes they vote afterwards about the winning team and evaluate the performance of each of them. They may choose the best speaker who can gain additional points for his/her team. In this manner all the students are actively involved in the process; they practise listening comprehension and note taking skills while they learn to evaluate arguments and their refutations.

The advantage of that particular form of debate lies in the active cooperation of the team; they need to decide about the allocation of roles based on the personalities and various competences of each of them, they have to support each other by helping the speaker with quick notes possible development or clarification of arguments during their turn to

speaking. The format is preferred by outspoken, extrovert and competitive type of students. As for the disadvantages, the time pressure can be an issue with especially eloquent students, and equally the high expectations of team partners. The strongly competitive and confrontational character of the debate can be excessively demanding on some of them as well. But one of the aims of such a language course is to draw the students out of their comfort zone by practicing for them unfamiliar forms of communication which they may face in real life situations. The team debate can for example help them prepare for negotiations within their future professional careers.

FINDINGS OF THE THREE YEARS

The course has been completed three times as yet, we are in the fourth one and therefore we can draw some conclusions based on that experience and evaluate the interesting findings and inspirational ideas for the next rounds. The contribution of students who offered their opinions and suggestions has been proven invaluable. The most important finding which both students and the teacher agreed on was a more intensive period of initial practice as arguments and refutation present more difficulties than originally expected. When starting the course for the first time, the students were eager to start immediately with the team debates as they promised most fun. Now the experience shows that they are usually not prepared enough and they get lost in their arguments and they equally need special practice with refutations and even with rebuttals.

Another useful improvement was suggested in the form of short individual practice speeches where students choose a topic they are familiar with and have a clear opinion about it. They feel less stressed and more focused on the proposed topic. These short independent presentations of arguments in favour of a chosen motion have led to implementation of a new form of debate practice which is included into the courses. This innovation labelled as

speech duels was inspired by several interesting movie debates (Entertainment, 2013) we could find on the internet. As mentioned above, the students make their first steps in debates and practice first only argumentation and later refutation in that smaller format.

The third improvement has been introduced concerning student involvement and responsibility for the outcome of the course. Initially, I presented the students with a list of topics and their task was to search for information in various media. After the completion of the first course we decided that students should be involved in the selection process so we proposed a longer list and they chose ten which were then debated. This approach enabled to tailor the motions to their specificities of each particular group and made them more involved. Our current course is based on an even more democratic principle; students suggest their own topics which are complemented by the teacher's proposals and a final short list is made up of both. Whether the latest method is successful will be clear by the final evaluation.

CONCLUSION

We attempted in this paper to introduce our own specific form of development of speaking skills and evaluate our experience of three years. The various forms of debate included in the course pose different demands on the students and correspond with the expectations of different types of students; thus everybody can feel equally comfortable or challenged. The language competence of the students keeps improving as well because they expand their vocabulary, they have to formulate their own ideas and express them in a studied foreign language practice its use while trying to persuade others about their 'truth'.

It is obvious that three years and four courses cannot return a satisfactory amount of data and information to arrive at far reaching conclusions. However they may present at least a valuable insight into the practicality of debates as developers of language and

communication competence, and prove or refute our original expectations. We started the very first course with high hopes for intensive student engagement and strong motivation and in that sense the feedback has been repeatedly very positive. We believe that the degree of active involvement depends on the students' interest in the chosen motions so we give them

an opportunity to make choices within a pool of suggested topics and even propose their own ones. Moreover, the fact that each student receives evaluation regularly and can earn or lose points during each of them contributes to a dynamic and active atmosphere. Last but not least, success in debates has proven to be a strong motivator as well.

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