

PRECONDITIONS OF LEADING A SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSION IN TESL FORMAT

ПЕРЕДУМОВИ ВЕДЕННЯ УСПІШНОЇ ДИСКУСІЇ У ФОРМАТІ «НАВЧАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ»

The article deals with the problem of getting students to talk willingly and correctly in the English language classroom. The article focuses on teaching speaking through discussion as one of the most effective ways to encourage and promote students' fluent communicative skills. Two learning principles, a traditional, passive, and a modern one, active, have been contrasted in the article. The advantages of the use of active learning principle in modern higher educational institutions have been highlighted in the article. It has been shown in the article that there is also a good possibility of enabling students to develop their higher-order thinking skills by participating in a discussion.

The importance of teaching speaking to students has been highlighted. The benefits of teaching speaking through discussion have been outlined in the article. Prerequisites of leading a successful discussion have been analyzed. The definition of precondition has been given to explain clearly what aspects should be taken into consideration while preparing for the discussion-based class. Correspondingly, the factors of leading a successful discussion in TESL format have been explored and presented.

There have been identified and studied anticipated difficulties which can occur in the discussion-based classroom while implementing the method into practice. Three groups of factors affecting leading of discussions, namely cognitive, social/emotional and physical ones, have been pointed out and described.

The author suggests the main guidelines which apply to the instructor and the students while preparing for the discussion.

Further steps of the investigation should be made in the direction of elaborating the most efficient strategies of implementing the discussion method into practical classes.

Key words: *preconditions, discussion-based classroom, communicative skills, anticipated difficulties, cognitive, emotional, physical factors.*

У статті йдеться про розвиток комунікативних навичок студентів засобом використання методу дискусії. Уміло організована дискусія під час аудиторних занять англій-

ською мовою – важливий елемент навчання, де студенти навчаються грамотного вільного володіння іноземною мовою, яку вивчають. Стаття присвячена дискусії як одному із найефективніших методів навчання говоріння. У публікації висвітлено відмінності двох моделей навчання: традиційної пасивної та сучасної активної. У статті наведено переваги використання моделі активного навчання у сучасних вищих навчальних закладах. У статті також зазначено, що, беручи участь у англомовній дискусії, студенти можуть ефективно розвивати навички критичного мислення, що є актуальним питанням сучасної освіти.

У статті висвітлено важливість формування і розвитку комунікативних навичок, окреслено переваги навчання говоріння засобом методу дискусії. Проаналізовано і висвітлено передумови проведення успішної дискусії під час аудиторної роботи. Відповідно, описано можливі шляхи ведення успішної дискусії при вивченні англійської мови як іноземної. Виявлено й описано труднощі, які можуть виникнути під час дискусійного заняття на практиці. Зазначено й описано три групи факторів, що впливають на ведення дискусії, а саме: когнітивні, соціальні / емоційні та фізичні. У статті йдеться про передумови та чинники ведення ефективної дискусії, а саме як організувати аудиторне заняття таким чином, щоб студентам було комфортно, щоб вони були зацікавлені в обговоренні питань, вмотивовані у виконанні завдань і водночас розвивали комунікативні навички, вільно висловлюючи свою думку, й уміли критично мислити.

Автором описано основні принципи підготовки до дискусії. Подальше дослідження буде спрямоване на вивчення та розроблення ефективних стратегій впровадження методу дискусії під час практичних занять англійською мовою.

Ключові слова: *передумови, аудиторна робота на основі дискусії, комунікативні навички, труднощі, які можна передбачити, когнітивні, емоційні та фізичні фактори.*

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Problem statement in general form. Discussions can be efficient for motivating students to speak a foreign language; express, exchange and consider their points of view concerning a different subject matter, defend their positions and form a critical opinion on their personal evidence. Discussions can create new learning opportunities for students at practical classes as well as seminars and lectures.

What is more, using a discussion is very effective for students as it enables them to use both the command of the target language and the knowledge of the subject with a view to reaching a whole-class / group consensus.

Nevertheless, leading a discussion may turn out to be rather unproductive, inhibiting and stressful for students and the instructor.

The **problem** of organizing a successful discussion has been outlined by means of studying the experience and publications of the leading foreign methodologists: B.G. Davis, H.S. Davis, Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill. The preconditions ensuring the effective discussion-based classroom have been pointed out.

An analysis of recent research and publications. The problem of the practical application of the discussion method has been researched and

highlighted by the following foreign and Ukrainian scientists: P.Ur ("Discussions that Work: Task-centered Fluency Practice": General guidelines on the organization of successful task-centered activities and effective practical examples in the classroom have been provided in the book), B.G. Davis (Book "Tools for Teaching"), H.S. Davis (Article "Discussion as a Bridge: Strategies that Engage Adolescent and Adult Learning Styles in the Postsecondary Classroom"), Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill ("Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms"), N.M. Toptyhina (Teaching discussion on the basis of literary texts in the process of learning English as a second foreign language), I.O. Simkova (Methodology of English professional discussion teaching of engineering students), N.P. Andronik (Teaching future English teachers discussion on the basis of authentic poetic texts).

Emphasizing previously unresolved parts of the common problem. Though the common problem of organizing the learning process and mastering students' speaking skills by means of discussion has been explored by Ukrainian methodologists with more emphasis on the cognitive aspect the topic still needs to be investigated. The other two factors influencing the efficient leading of the discussion-based classes, namely, social/emotional and physical ones have been thoroughly studied and described in the article.

The development of communication skills together with critical thinking, collaboration and creativity make common core 21st century skills. The article is focused on the four key skills which can be developed through discussion. Anticipated difficulties in leading discussions have been pointed out and described.

The choice of the topic of the article is stipulated by the necessity of forming and developing students' speaking skills within the frame of the active learning principle.

The goal of the article is to study and analyze prerequisites of leading a successful discussion. **The tasks** of the article are to explore and identify the probable difficulties which might rise at a discussion class and their solutions, to give recommendations for leading a productive discussion, while implementing the method into the English language classroom.

In ESL (English as a Second Language) Curriculum speaking is regarded as a "key element". Developing speaking skills is one of the main objectives of teaching English as a foreign language. The importance of teaching speaking has been underestimated for many years. All attention was paid to memorizing long lists of words, reading, translating and reproduction of dialogues learnt by heart.

The English language teachers have taught speaking as a repetition of drills and memorizing of dialogues with the further reproduction but not a production. It was considered to be the development of learners' speaking skills which, definitely, was a

misleading opinion. Doing mainly mechanical drills and cramming could not develop speaking skills but instead resulted in students' boredom and complete demotivation to learn foreign languages.

Up-to-now, it has been common practice to learn English at school, then at higher educational institutions and, at the same time, being quite unable to make up short dialogues impromptu on daily topics outside the classroom. Higher-order thinking skills were completely neglected.

Language fluency is defined more likely as the ability to communicate with other people rather than the ability to read, write or understand the oral language. To develop speaking skills efficiently it is highly recommended to the foreign language teachers to use the active learning principle instead of a traditional passive one.

Discussion as an interactive speaking strategy has plenty of benefits. Students learn how to express their opinions, express their points of view, defend their positions, evaluate evidence thus developing their speaking skills.

Active learning principle provides students with opportunities to master their skills and develop critical thinking. It brings considerable contrast to a traditional style of teaching, where students were expected to passively sit in the classroom listening to the teacher, making notes and supposedly learning the information presented by the lecturer, passively absorbing the new information.

Active learning provides students with the opportunity to apply the knowledge or experience which they have already had. Interactivity principles applied are the following ones: students learn how to discuss problems and not only passively take in new information, how to find answers and defend conclusions coming to an ultimate group consensus. The knowledge of preconditions of leading a discussion can result in productive classes characterized by students' genuine interest and a successful learning process.

The word "precondition" is defined as "prerequisite, something that is necessary to an end or to the carrying out of a function, anything that must be accomplished or acquired before something else can be done" [4].

Being aware of anticipated difficulties as well as knowing the main factors of effective leading a discussion and the ability to use proper techniques, in action should provide smooth application of the discussion method in practice. The acquired knowledge can ensure the plan's success.

The first task of the article is to identify the problems and find solutions the instructors may deal with while incorporating the method into practical classes. There are different issues which can affect students' readiness and willingness to take part in discussions. Among them there tend to be students' unwillingness to partake either caused by fear of making mistakes

and saying something wrong, or the absence of the evidence and experience on the suggested topic. Some other reasons can vary from a student's reluctance of not working with the particular partner/s to not being self-confident. The solution of the problems which may inhibit students from participation in a discussion can be suggested by taking into consideration the following stipulations:

1) taking into consideration cognitive factors, i.e. announcing learning objectives, planning a strategy, asking questions, providing direction and maintaining focus, bringing closure;

2) social/emotional factors, i.e. demonstrating relevance, encouraging participation, evaluating the discussion;

3) physical factors, i.e. creating a setting conducive for the discussion.

"While discussions provide avenues for exploration and discovery, leading a discussion can be anxiety-producing: discussions are, by their nature, unpredictable, and require us as instructors to surrender a certain degree of control over the flow of information" [1, p. 123].

When the discussion is being planned all the factors mentioned must be thought over beforehand to provide an effective conversation class. Moreover, the discussion procedure should be planned carefully. Otherwise the discussion can be disorderly and chaotic. Some students might not have had any previous experience of being involved in a discussion and the method will turn out to be quite new and unfamiliar to them.

Cognitive factors presuppose every discussion having a clear purpose. Knowing the ultimate purpose of the conversation in advance will help to determine the appropriate format for the ensuing discussion [3, p. 71].

Each discussion topic should be thoroughly chosen with the view of the relevance to the course objectives. The learning objectives must be communicated to the students at the very beginning. If the objectives and the rules are announced to the students, it helps them to focus on the topic and makes their participation more desirable. When students are able to collaboratively talk about classroom topics with their peers, they engage in activities that are more reflective of "real-world" problem-solving events within those fields, fulfilling adult learners' need to find relevance in their studies [3, p. 70].

To anticipate the possible weak points of the planned discussion the instructor should consider the following questions:

- How do I want students to prepare: read a case study? (if so, in class or as homework?) do a team exercise? watch a documentary? reflect on a set of questions?

- What questions will I pose to spark or guide discussion? to encourage deeper analysis?

- Will I open the discussion to the entire class or ask students to discuss the issue in pairs, small groups, or some combination of the above?

- What will I do if students simply aren't participating? If certain students dominate the discussion?

- How will I allocate and manage the time I have?

- How will I deal with digressions or unanticipated shifts in topic?

- How will I correct students' misconceptions or inaccuracies without stifling participation?

- How will I (or my students) synthesize the ideas at the end of the class period? [1, p. 120].

The teacher should prepare a set of questions for the students to get the discussion started and to analyze the problem more deeply. For every separate topic a teacher can prepare a list of questions including:

- Exploratory questions: probe facts and basic knowledge;

- Challenge questions: interrogate assumptions, conclusions or interpretations;

- Relational questions: ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues;

- Diagnostic questions: probe motives or causes;

- Action questions: call for a conclusion or action;

- Cause-and-effect questions: ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events;

- Extension questions: expand the discussion;

- Hypothetical questions: pose a change in the facts or issues;

- Priority questions: seek to identify the most important issues;

- Summary questions: elicit synthesis [2].

The questions suggested by B.G. Davis correspond to Bloom's taxonomy of learning objectives. Students start discussing with easier questions and go to more complex ones, ranging from low-order to high order thinking skills questions.

Another example of question types to keep the discussion going was suggested by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill.

- Questions that ask for more evidence, e.g. How do you know that?

- Questions that ask for clarification, e.g. What's a good example of what you are talking about?

- Open questions, e.g. What does he mean by this?

- Linking or extension questions, e.g. How does your observation relate to what the group decided last week?

- Hypothetical questions, e.g. If Shakespeare had intended Iago to be a tragic or more sympathetic figure, how might he have changed the narrative of Othello?

- Cause-and-effect questions, e.g. What is likely to be the effect of raising the average class size from 15 to 30 on the ability of learners to conduct interesting and engaging discussions?

– Summary and synthesis questions, e.g. What remains unresolved or contentious about this topic? [1, p. 217].

Asking questions is helpful for organizing and leading discussions and for learning how to give deep analyses of the problematic issues. If students frequently practise rehearsing discussions in the classroom, they will have no difficulty in taking part in discussions in real life situations.

The common mistakes instructors can make are asking several questions at a time in case the student is slow with answering. Then the student cannot figure out what question to answer. The other not less frequently occurring problem is asking and answering the questions yourself. When the student is not prepared properly and remains silent or stumbles through the answer, teachers have a tendency to come to their rescue avoiding that tense long-lasting silence. The fact that a different amount of time is needed to think what to say and how to say to different learner types must be taken into consideration. Another problem which may arise is to teach students not only to talk but to show them how to find and provide reasoning of their points of view, how to defend their positions and how to come to a group consensus which is not less important.

Lead-in and follow-up questions are helpful for leading discussions. The lead-in questions help the class start the discussion introducing students into the problem. The latter ones provoke students' deeper thinking, reasoning and justification of ideas.

There are three more important points which cannot be ignored. There should be a logical order in asking questions. The instructors should remember that if the questions fit together well, they will make a story. Another essential point is that if only general questions are asked they can stop the discussion though yes/no questions may be good starting points of a discussion. If the questions presuppose the only clear answer given, it may also cause a stop of the talk. The questions asked should be thought-provoking. Finally, no student will feel motivated unless their answers are evaluated and they are praised for their contributions. Peer feedback is also welcomed and appreciated.

At the end of the discussion there should be a closing-up stage where students together with the teacher synthesize the main topics covered, key questions discussed and point out conclusions made. It is a good idea to write the main questions on the chalkboard or share them on the screen in case of an online class and come back to those questions from time to time focusing students' attention on them. Then at the end of the discussion the teacher can elicit students' ideas on what they consider the key questions of the whole discussion to be. Students can also be offered to write reflection reports after every discussion which helps them realize the learning objectives which were introduced to the students at

the beginning of the class. All these steps lead to the development of students' speaking skills and what is so important today – their critical thinking.

Social and emotional factors are demonstrating relevance and encouraging participation. The instructor should explain to the students how relevant the discussion is to our life skills in general. Students can be offered to discuss its practical use as the initial topic on the first day.

A comfortable climate, building rapport is essential to provide students' meaningful participation in discussions. Every student should be treated respectfully. The instructor's and peers' comments must never be offensive but constructive.

All the requirements should be introduced on the first day. Students' preparatory work is necessary for efficient leading of discussions. Discussions often break down because students have not prepared their homework readings or have not found/collected any evidence to confirm their viewpoints. According to a student-centered approach it is not only the teacher who prepares materials for the class. The students can also assist the teacher in preparing interesting questions, topics, and cards relevant for the discussion class. Supplying your students with a list of useful language (phrases how to start a discussion, how to agree/disagree, phrases for clarification etc.) to lead a discussion is also encouraging for the students' active participation.

To evaluate discussions students can write briefly about what they learned, how their thinking changed, or how the discussion relates to other course materials.

According to Brookfield and Preskill students "keep a weekly audit of their participation in class discussions and then summarize and analyze their entries in an end-of-semester learning portfolio" [1, p. 218].

If it is an online discussion the whole class can be recorded and assessed. The instructor will have even a better opportunity to evaluate every student's participations, the level of language skills. Students themselves can analyze their work during an online discussion-based classroom. In this case they should be supplied with a checklist. The checklist points can be discussed and suggested by the students. Peers' evaluation is also a good idea. The evaluation criteria should be set and students need to get familiar with them before the discussion class.

Instructors can evaluate discussions less formally, simply by asking themselves the questions after the class, for example: Who participated? Who didn't? What might explain the patterns of participation? What questions proved most fruitful and why? How might the discussion be improved to promote deeper inquiry, more student-student interaction, etc.? [1, p. 219].

As a warming-up activity students can be asked to share their reaction on the assigned quotations, topics, problems, articles, home reading stories, other readings on the poster or in a discussion online group

before the class. They can also do a written assignment after the class describing their impressions and reflecting on the discussion held.

Another aspect promoting successful discussion leading is a physical factor which is meant by "creating a setting conducive for the discussion". The setting can be organized in quite different ways depending on the objectives of the class. According to three modes of interaction students can have pair discussions, group discussions and whole-class discussions.

Plans for classroom conversation should include strategic attempts by the instructor to ensure that all students actively participate. This may include a plan for breaking the class into smaller groups for talk, or finding ways to limit the contributions of some students who tend to dominate conversations, while also encouraging more reticent students to become involved [3, p. 71].

It depends on the physical space how settings can be organized. In some classrooms, students can sit so they could see everybody i.e. around an oval/round table or simply in a circle if the classroom is spacious enough. If the classroom arrangement is traditional with rows of desks and the instructor positioned in front of the classroom before the rows of student chairs, students can work in pairs first and then every two pairs can be united just having turned and facing one another. The class size does limit the options sometimes, but discussions are still possible even in too small classrooms. The chairs can be set around one table, in a circle, in a U-shape, two chairs at one desk, or no chairs at all, e.g. when all students are standing in two circles - one inner and one outer circles so that every student from the inner circle could have a new discussion partner from the outer

one while the outer circle members circulate around the inner circle changing discussion partners.

Conclusions. Classroom conversations provide students with a good opportunity for mastering their target language speaking skills. It is apparent that students also learn how to formulate and develop their higher-order thinking skill by means of participating in discussion-based classes.

To increase students' interest in the class the instructor should build rapport. The comments given to students should contain praising and constructive criticism to foster students' ability to think critically and to make decisions. Carefully planned discussions ensure students' success. The instructors must be aware of possible problematic areas and take into account three aspects: cognitive, social/emotional and physical ones. Student-centered approach presupposes students' involvement in preparation for the discussion-based class which makes the discussion even more effective.

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