**Speaking Strategies: Developing Communicative Skills in English**

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**Abstract:** This present research makes a survey of different speaking strategies and techniques, first approached theoretically before being developed in their own practice contexts to develop communicative skills in English for the 1st year students in Geography and Tourism. For further practice we subsequently recommend a concise list of websites that offer diverse opportunities of English conversation thus enabling students to practice speaking English via Internet. We eventually highlight the great value of the communicative techniques and exercises such as small talk practice, role-plays, points of view, different topic discussions and debates or group decision making activities, as valid and rewarding communication strategies, for both sides, teachers and students altogether.

**Key words:** communication skills, speaking techniques, small talk, role-play, viewpoint, debate, decision making, conversation websites.

It is unanimously accepted that speaking activity is the most difficult task among the four study skills in a foreign language. Passing a message in a fluent and accurate manner is not a handy success. People learning English often feel comfortable enough with comprehension or grammar, but when it comes to conversation, they do not feel at easy at all because of their inability to speak the language at their appropriate level.

The first part of this present study is intended to outline some of the reasons why students find it sometimes difficult to engage in complex conversational contexts and express their viewpoints in English. We will consequently highlight some improvement that could be
made to avoid such circumstances or at least to reduce their occurrences by the use of
different speaking tips, strategies and techniques to develop communicative skills.

Some of the barriers that might be in the way of building production skills are both
internal and external to the observed speakers, namely students in the 1st academic year in
Geography of Tourism from the Faculty of Geography in Cluj. Among the internal
conversation ‘blocking’, we first mention student’s lack of confidence in joining a
communication activity, their embarrassment in sharing either personal or general opinions.
Other internal reasons for blocking are the use of literal translation from their mother tongue,
students trying to translate from their native language into English, the lack of general English
knowledge, and last but not least, moments of hesitation since speakers are often looking for a
specific word to express their opinion, rather than using simple language.

Among the external conversation ‘blocking’, there are usually mentioned lack of
conversation opportunities and little time for language active use.

Teaching conversational skills is not an easy task either. We will highlight throughout
our study ways of cutting down the risks of such internal and external conversation ‘blocking’
in order to develop speaking skills in and outside class. If there are not enough conversation
opportunities, teachers must pick up subjects that are likely to stimulate students’ availability
and interest in expressing their views. It is up to teachers to make good choices for their class
activities because they know that the first rule of improving speaking skills is make people
speak, converse, talk or gab as much as possible.

If there is little time for language active use, teachers must divide courses into sections
leaving more time for speaking that for grammar rules, for instance, since many students are
more interested in making effective small talk than knowing correct grammar structures.
Atmosphere in class counts a lot and students’ state of mine either. Researchers have proved
that happy students learn faster than worried or bored students. In fact, worry and boredom
block language learning. When students feel bad, their memory is worse and their brain is
slower whereas they have fun, they learn English two or three times faster.

With regard to teachers, they should deal with different strategies to make students
improve their conversational abilities. There are a lot of conversation exercises pragmatically
focussed on improving communication skills:

- making small talk
- using role-plays
- expressing points of view
- debating on different topic discussions
We will now proceed to give some examples of ways of implementing this communication approach throughout speaking tasks and exercises in order to develop communicative skills and performance in English. Our study joins short theoretical approach of speaking strategies and techniques in conversational classes to brief illustration of the mentioned communicative activities.

I. Making small talk

The ability to make small talk is not something easily acquired. It demands a lot of practice but, when successful, it is highly valued. Making small talk means of course talking about almost anything and thus having a wide appropriate vocabulary covering most topics of interest. It is an important speaking activity leading to a gain of specific vocabulary and ability in coping with spontaneous circumstances. First the teacher should choose a topic that might interest all the students and keep to it in order to get their involvement. Students in Geography of Tourism are more likely to be interested in small talk about travel, food and catering, travel offers or tourism professionals.

I. a. Small talk in use

The teacher asks students to give some key-words that could sum up ideas about a country seen as a tourist destination, a subject that is to be developed in that specific lesson. Let us take as an example Mexico, a diverse and vibrant country. Students say words that cross their mind while thinking of this country…and the game sets off: Mexico city, desert, cactus, tequila, chilli pepper, beans and corns, sombrero, mariachi, Mayas, Aztecs, Spanish, tradition, poverty, immigration, artists, Frida Kahlo, Salma Hayek, Llasa de Sela, and so on. This is an excellent warming-up activity to break the ice and make students be prepared to engage themselves in a role-play activity.

II. Using role-plays

The role-play is a basic speaking activity focussed on target structures which the teacher provides by the use of cue cards turning ordinary conversation practice into a mini drama, and thus humanising language teaching. It can be an excellent opportunity for students to launch themselves into extended interaction and a good way to develop fluency by focusing on the task in hand. The teacher should build up the atmosphere by asking lead-in questions.
so as to warm up and engage students’ interest in the specific situation and to set the context of their role play.

We quote from Siabhra Woods’s article *A Validation of Drama in the Classroom*, where the ‘power of Drama’ is seen as potency ‘to create catharsis, an emotional energy or process of releasing strong feelings through plays or other artistic activities’.

### II. a. Role-plays in use

The conversational situation is set in a travel agency where some students work as travel agents. Some other students will play the tourists who would like to spend their holiday in a far-flung and exotic country. The travel offer will be focused on Mexico. The travel agents make their offer highlighting the advantages of a holiday there. They make a short factfile of the country: hit list with major tourist attractions, itineraries throughout the country, a bit of geography, scenery, history, people diversity, weather, and other details to enhance tourists’ interest in their promotional package. The tourists ask different questions about what they have just been told and they want to have answers about more practical details too: price, accommodation, means of transportation, discounts. After having played this drama and written down some notes to keep in mind, they will be able to express their viewpoints about this travel offer.

### III. Expressing points of view

This speaking activity helps students express their opinions on a number of (controversial) issues and explain their reasoning. The teacher should give points of view worksheet and ask them to rate their opinion from one to ten (*1- strongly agree / 10 - strongly disagree*) on different statements from the students’ field of interest. It is a dynamic activity involving on the long run a gain of confidence and self-assuredness of students expressing their own points of view or in making comments on other person's point of view. They will also learn how to put up with diverse and opposing ideas letting the others state their own opinions which will definitely lead to a higher quality of the discussion. As a follow-up activity, students may be asked to sum the main ideas up in a short presentation.

### III. a. Points of view in use

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1 Siabhra Woods is a teacher and trainer at IH, London, and she often holds drama-based workshops. See her article *A Validation of Drama in the Classroom* on [http://www.hltmag.co.uk/may01/sart3.htm](http://www.hltmag.co.uk/may01/sart3.htm), retrieved on 9.12.2009, 3.38 p.m.
The students express their feelings about the tourist offer they have just been made. They may have different opinions about it therefore they bring some for/against arguments. They make a list of pros and cons and speak about the advantages and disadvantages of going there. The whole class participates with suggestions: Is Mexico a dangerous country? Is this travel offer a ‘temptation you cannot resist’? Is it worth going there? Are there many highlights to be put on the tourists’ hit list?

Once students become more comfortable with this multi point of view practice, they can then move onto more elaborated speaking exercises and activities.

IV. Debating on different topic discussions:

A debate is a form of argument based on several rules of conduct and arguing techniques. It is a more engaging activity since students need to develop concepts and to argue on diverse subjects embarking in pros and cons and commenting on the arguments presented. This speaking activity is usually performed in a debating team each speaker having specific roles during the topic discussion. In debating each team will present points in favour of their case, but they will also take into account and criticise the other team’s arguments through what it is called rebuttal.

IV. a. Debates and different topic discussions in use

Students will be split into two groups, one team working in the travel agency and the other, embodying the tourists who have not made up their mind yet. The debate centres itself on some glaring issues in Mexico which make life insecure even for a visiting person: poverty, dealers, immigration, crimes. The travel agents will try to see things on their bright side focusing on the beauty of nature, historical cities, fertile and traditional countryside, all the advantages brought by a rich culture to emphasise the worth of the experience. The other team is a bit cautious. Students should use language patterns to express:

Opinions and preferences:

I think..., I believe..., I strongly believe..., My strong belief is..., In my opinion..., I'd like to..., I'd rather..., I'd prefer..., The way I see it..., As far as I'm concerned..., If it were up to me..., If I were in their place..., If I were in their shoes..., I suppose..., I suspect that..., I'm pretty sure that..., It is fairly certain that..., I'm convinced that..., I honestly feel that..., Without a doubt,...

Disagreeing:
I don't think that..., I'm afraid I don't agree..., Don't you think it would be better..., I don't agree, I'd prefer..., Shouldn't we consider..., But what about..., Frankly, I doubt if..., Let's face it..., The truth of the matter is..., The problem with your opinion is that...

**Giving Reasons and offering explanations:**

To start with…, When you consider that..., The reason why..., That's why..., For this reason..., That's the reason why..., Allowing for the fact that..., Many people think....., Considering....

After this debate, the tourist team should be ready to make its final decision.

**V. Practising group decision making activities:**

Group decision making is a conversational task based on reflective thinking and brainstorming. This pattern of speaking activity is straightforward, presenting students with a range of decisions, each with several options to make a choice from. It is an excellent exercise for improving the dynamics and competitiveness with a class, students being asked to make a systematic approach to a particular topic and to generate as many ideas as they can within a structured framework for discussion.

**V. a. Decision making activities in use**

The tourist team makes its final decision after all these steps and time spent in the travel agency and it names a representative to announce the decision to the whole class. They briefly sum up all theirs arguments against or in favour of their trip in Mexico.

**For further practice**

After this survey of speaking strategies in use, we need to underline this great number of web sites offering diverse opportunities for English conversation thus enabling students to practice speaking English via Internet. We recommend this concise list as a very helpful material:

1. **iTalki** is a network dedicated to people who want to improve their language skills by conversing with native-English speakers and practising with them while sharing their own opinions, culture, civilization and language in return. The site advertisement “Find everything you need to learn a language” is extremely motivating and helps with finding a language teacher, practicing with a language exchange partner, finding new free resources of learning foreign languages and starting group discussions. ([http://www.italki.com/](http://www.italki.com/))
2. **SoZiety** is a language exchange platform that keeps a database of users with their native language, interests and the language they would like to learn thus enabling the process of finding others to practice English, or native speakers to help English learning in exchange for help with your native language. ([http://www.soziety.com/](http://www.soziety.com/))

3. **KanTalk** is a network that connects English learners worldwide through free Internet telephony to practice spoken English, or any other language. There are live conversations online in different proficiency levels, exploring a wide range of user-generated topics. ([http://www.kantalk.com/](http://www.kantalk.com/))

4. **EnglishCafe** is social network entirely dedicated to learning and improving English through communication. It offers a number of resources such as groups, blogs, Skype chat, and it has a great global English community. ([http://www.englishcafe.com/](http://www.englishcafe.com/))

5. **Eglish, baby!** is another social network where students could find English pen pals, get in touch and exchange ideas with people around the world to practice their English through free lessons, videos, MP3s, quizzes, forums and chat ([http://englishbabyblog.com/](http://englishbabyblog.com/))

To conclude our study we highlight the great value of the conversation techniques and exercises we have approached here, such as small talk practice, role-plays, points of view, different topic discussions and debates or group decision making activities, as valid and rewarding communication strategies, for both sides, teachers and students altogether. This approach bears fruit especially when students are previously asked to do some research about a specific geographic area so as to be able and ready to make the most of it in the classroom. The teacher should run the class efficiently giving further details about the particular context helping the students when they run into difficulties or run out of ideas. To quote Siabhra Woods’ words, students ‘come to the classroom for 'a dynamic', an opportunity to 'speak using what we've learned', 'energy’ and these can be supplied by […]” all these speaking activities and strategies to develop conversation skills in English, improve overall communication ability and fluency as well as launch them into challenging activities and complex conversational contexts.
Bibliography:

Specific sites for:

1. Small talk:
   http://esl.about.com/od/conversationlessonplans/a/lesson_smtalk.htm
   http://www.eslflow.com/Socializingandmakingsmalltalk.html
   http://www.eastsideliteracy.org/tutorsupport/Work/Work_Talk.htm

2. Role-plays:
   http://www.hltmag.co.uk/may01/sart3.htm
   http://www.eslflow.com/roleplaysdramatetheatregames.html

3. Points of view:
   http://www.eslflow.com/Tourismlessons.html
   http://www.eslflow.com/speakingandcommunicativeicebreakeractivities.html
   http://stormy.blogs.com/global/

4. Debating on different topic discussions:
   http://www.eslflow.com/debateanddiscussionlessons.html
   www.educations.com/tourism
   http://www.stgeorge.freeservers.com/guide_debate.htm

5. Practising group decision making activities:
   http://www.abacon.com/commstudies/groups/decision.html
   http://www.time-management-guide.com/decision-making-skills.html
   http://www.virtualsalt.com/crebook5.htm

English Conversation Sites:
   http://www.italki.com/
   http://www.soziety.com/
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   http://www.englishcafe.com/
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