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TEACHING SPEAKING TO B2 LEVEL STUDENTS THROUGH THE TASK-BASED APPROACH

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Abstract. This article focuses on teaching speaking skills to B2 level of English proficiency students using a TBL approach. Objectives and content of a speaking course are identified as well as the role of the teacher. The structure of a lesson (J. Willis framework) is given with three main stages (pre-task, task cycle and language focus). An example of group discussions lesson is given too. Teaching resources, assessment methods and limitations of this approach are also discussed.
Keywords: speaking skills, B2 level, task-based learning, communicative competence, English language teaching methodology.

Introduction.

Speaking is the skill by which learners most often judge their progress but it is also the skill that develops slowly in classes where lessons end with a grammar exercise. Students at B2 level usually know the rules and understand a lot of texts but when speaking they hesitate, give very short answers and repeat memorised phrases. The Common European Framework expects B2 speakers to interact fluently and spontaneously and take an active part in discussion (Council of Europe, 2020 p.72). This article shows how a university teacher can bridge the gap between knowing the language and using it and argues that task-based approach is a suitable single method for this purpose.

Learners and aims of the course. The course is aimed at B2 level university students. After several years of study they have a stable grammar base and receptive vocabulary so they don't need to be taught again how to form a question or past tense. Their problems are different: they plan sentences word by word, avoid unfamiliar topics and wait for the teacher to nominate the next speaker. Many use the same few linking words and rarely ask a partner for clarification. Accuracy is not enough; communicative effectiveness is too. Students should be able to express and defend an opinion, take turns naturally, respond to a partner's ideas and repair breakdowns in conversation. These aims can be observed and assessed (which is important for the method chosen below). There are several reasons for this gap. Speaking is happening in real time so learners have to choose words, build grammar and listen to a partner at the same time — pressure is higher than with writing or reading. Students also fear making mistakes in front of classmates so they opt for short answers rather than risk looking stupid. Traditional practice consists of questions from teacher and one answer from each student so each learner only gets a few seconds of real talk in a lesson. So a method for B2 learners needs to increase speaking time, lower anxiety and give a reason to communicate.

Content of the speaking course. Three areas of content are at the core of the course: fluent interaction (opinions, agreeing and disagreeing politely, asking follow-up questions and turning turns

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in pair and group discussion); range and accuracy (topic vocabulary, collocations, discourse markers on the other hand and as a result etc., grammar for comparing, speculating and persuading); communication strategies (paraphrasing when word is missing, asking repetition, checking understanding and correcting oneself). These areas match B2 descriptors for spoken production and interaction in the CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020, pp. 69–72). Topics should be familiar and relevant to university life (study abroad, technology in education, student careers etc.) so that learners have something to say. Language is not taught separately from topics; vocabulary and grammar are chosen from what learners actually need while doing a task.

The task-based approach in the classroom. The method used for the course is task-based learning. A pedagogical task is a piece of classroom work where learners comprehend, manipulate, produce or interact in the target language while their attention is mainly on meaning (Nunan, 2004 p. 4). In a task learners need the language to get to a non-linguistic outcome (decision, list, plan) not just display a grammar point. That is why B2 speakers like it so much: because the outcome matters they have to negotiate meaning and use what they already have. Willis (1996, pp. 26–28) describes six types of task: listing; ordering and sorting; comparing; problem solving; sharing personal experiences and creative tasks. A speaking course can use all six but moves from short listing tasks to longer problem-solving discussions as confidence develops. Each lesson has three phases (Willis, 1996, pp. 52–58): pre-task phase — teacher introduces the topic, activates useful words/phrases and explains what learners need to achieve in the task cycle phase — learners do the task in pairs or small groups, prepare a short oral report on how they got their outcome and then present it to the class language focus phase — the teacher calls attention to forms that appeared during the task and learners practise them A 80-minute lesson is shown below to illustrate how this works. The topic is orientation for new international students. In the pre task phase (10 minutes) problems that newcomers have are brainstormed. In the task (20 minutes) groups of four choose five activities from a list of ten and agree on one day schedule; in planning (10 minutes) each group prepares a one minute report and decides who will speak; in report phase (15 minutes) groups present and class votes for most useful programme. Language focus (25 minutes) uses notes made by teacher while monitoring: learners correct sentences, study phrases for suggesting and persuading and repeat part of the task using them. Teacher doesn't interrupt during the task — his/her job is to monitor, note examples of good language and errors and give feedback afterwards (Willis, 1996, pp. 52–58).

Each of Willis' six task types can be adapted for speaking at B2 level (Willis, 1996 pp. 26–28). In a listing task pairs produce as many reasons as they can why people study abroad; in an ordering and sorting task groups rank the qualities of a good speaker and justify their order; in comparing tasks students compare two cities in which they could study and decide which is better for a newcomer; in problem solving groups plan an orientation programme or decide how a student club should spend a small budget; sharing personal experiences is telling a partner about a memorable journey or difficult exam and asking follow-up questions; creative tasks might be to design a short advertisement for a language course and present it. Because the outcomes are different students meet different kinds of talk: describing, explaining, arguing, narrating and persuading.

The roles of teacher and learners change in this approach. The teacher is organiser/monitor rather than main speaker; during the pre-task phase she explains what to do (clearly!) and makes sure everyone understands it but doesn't pre-teach every structure because the point of the task is to see what they can already do; while groups work the teacher moves around, listens and writes down

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examples of successful and problematic language; learners take responsibility for completing the outcome (and making sure every group member speaks); roles such as chair, note-taker, timekeeper and reporter help with this and give quiet students a reason to talk. Feedback is also organised differently: instead of correcting each error immediately (which interrupts the conversation and increases anxiety) feedback is given after the report phase. Notes made during monitoring are written on the board in two columns: good examples that the class can imitate and sentences with errors which the class corrects together without naming the speaker. This procedure keeps focus on communication during the task but gives learners accurate information about their language too. The recording of the report phase can be used for a second round: groups repeat the task or the report with new partners and try to use phrases studied in the language focus. Over a unit of four weeks the lessons can be sequenced from simple to more complex. In the first week learners do short listing and sharing tasks in pairs (easy to manage and build confidence), then compare and rank (opinions & reasons) in the second week, solve a problem as a group in the third week and present a plan to class (plan), fourth week creative task that combines everything (prepare and present proposal to small audience). Each week ends with a short self-assessment and final task is recorded for rubric. If internet access is not available all tasks can be done with printed lists and role cards and recordings made on phone and stored.

Resources and assessment. Three books support the course: Willis (1996 pp. 26–28, 52–58) gives task types and lesson framework; Nunan (2004 p. 4) defines a task used to check each activity; CEFR Companion Volume (Council of Europe, 2020 pp. 69–72) gives level descriptors. Classroom materials can be simple: picture sets, role cards, short authentic video clips and phone for recording.

Progress is measured in three ways. First task outcome (did the group complete the plan and explain it clearly)? Second short rubric with four criteria commonly used for speaking (fluency, range of language, accuracy and interaction). Third learners' self-assessment: after each lesson they write two phrases they used successfully and one they want to practice. Recording the report phase allows students to listen to themselves before the language focus.

Limitations and conclusion. The approach has limits. Preparation time is needed and topics chosen carefully. In large classes stronger students may dominate so chair, note-taker and reporter roles should rotate; because this article proposes a course design no learner data are reported and improvement in fluency should be checked with recordings and rubric scores before firm conclusions can be drawn. In summary, B2 students need more opportunities to use the language they already know (not more explanation of it). Task-based learning gives each speaking lesson a purpose and an outcome; keeps learners talking to each other; puts language study after communication (when students know what they need); with careful planning and regular assessment it can help learners become more fluent and independent speakers.

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