

LINKING FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOM WITH THE WORLD OUTSIDE

Т.Г. Каут

старший викладач

кафедри англійської мови гуманітарного напрямку № 3

Національного технічного університету України

„Київський політехнічний інститут”

Стаття описує розроблену методику обміну новинами під час занять з англійської мови студентів спеціальності «Інформаційні технології» Національного технічного університету України. Ефективність цієї практики доводиться за допомогою аналізу психологічних і методологічних аспектів даного методу одночасно із аналізом результатів дослідження, проведеного серед студентів.

Ключові слова: навчання, комунікація.

Background and Prerequisites. Although teaching foreign languages in sovereign Ukraine has been gaining due attention in recent years, the actual teaching support basis is still rather low. Changing for modern foreign language teaching technologies is under way, though, obviously, the process is not easy. The wall separating the Western World from the ex-Soviet territories evidently not "iron" anymore is still there. For Ukraine striving so hard for the European membership forming the worldwide outlook of the citizens who are likely to be building bridges between the West and East is crucially important.

The students I am teaching English at Kiev Technical University major in Information Technologies (IT). Their English knowledge lies mostly in the range of from low to upper intermediate levels. The point is this language competence often happens to be IT specialised and they are learning IT English according to the syllabus of professional training at the university.

With English being the internationally acknowledged language of computer science the language learning strategies for this category of learners are being formed almost in parallel with using computers. Computer world is the realia that fosters active learning environment for the learners. Computer users involuntarily become more motivated users at quite an early stage of the language acquisition in order to meet communication needs of the computer world. Probably of all English language learners they are the first to come into contact with authentic materials that help them to be computer savvy.

Admittedly, language is the most complex of all human activities. Each of the many language skills requires involvement of large areas of the brain activities and a complex interplay of local neural processing. In fact, while, on the one hand, computer realm is a powerful background for succeeding in acquiring a foreign language, on the

other hand, it leads to a certain brain specialization. Obviously, 'language structures and communication functions are not bound to specific situations'. Thus English verbal specialization of the learners comes into a certain conflict with general English usage.

There seems to be no linguistic challenge the learners wouldn't meet, naturally sacrificing grammatical accuracy, to get an idea across in English if it is from the domain of their professional interest. However, being placed into a speaking environment concerning something outside the computer realm they may find themselves at a loss. Suddenly everything comes to be an unresolvable obstacle: how to start speaking, how to formulate a well-realizable idea, how to use grammar correctly. There is an impression the learners are falling out of their shell and their skills do get shaky.

Constraints on Students. We might speak of some specific constraints hindering speaking activity, like unusual conversation topic, lack of good knowledge or interest to a subject, lack of psychological comfort in particular environment or insufficient linguistic competence. Obviously, the reasons for the difficulties vary as much as the solutions. Going beyond the boundaries of the curriculum is not an untypical situation with experienced tutors if and when time permits to cope with the essential syllabus material. Basically a justifiable deviation is a pedagogic procedure to meet learners actual needs.

Optimal pedagogic procedure for resolving a particular objective depends on many factors – learners' age, proficiency, cognitive style, time available, however, teacher philosophy and preferences seem to be most decisive. Striving to withdraw the learners from their element to expand their outlook to assimilate them into the logic of the social system I have

resorted to a seemingly trivial technique of the news exchange. This form of discourse seemed to me most suitable for the audience since it can be used in a most flexible way to tap for the solutions against the above mentioned constraints within quite a limited time. Basically, as is often the case, it serves as a warmer at the beginning of a class.

Let us have a closer look at the above-mentioned constraints constituting students' challenges. Unusual conversation topic is intrinsically anticipated in the news-discussion. The amount of unfamiliar words may really be overwhelming unless information is treated at a comprehensible level. The challenge is furthermore enhanced by the topic drift characteristic of natural discourse. Indeed, the twists in the discussion of an event need to be casually monitored to avoid unnecessary confusion and the impression of imposing the discussion.

The psychological constraints can't be underestimated either. Reporting an event in front of colleagues means more than just telling a story. Students analyse their story for its newsworthiness to show off their competence especially concerning technical matters. The news discussion may easily turn into a battle of ambitions about a better knowledge of some novelty. Thus the newsworthy information presentation may happen to be an image making session for individual students.

Finally, there arises a question of linguistic proficiency for the activity. Isn't it too early to subject the intermediate level students to the linguistic challenge they may not cope with? The constraint does have its effect. But with proper instrumentation it can be minimized and, anyway, the advantages outweigh the limitations.

Objectives and Principles. The full potential of the news exchange hasn't revealed itself until the practice was fully established. Once it was established certain objectives took shape and hence principles. It would probably be right to assume that the experience is feasible only in the classroom with high cognitive capabilities and expectations. In fact, in the earlier stages we confined the news to the world of technology. In time the boundaries expanded to become boundless but the fact is a lot of the news still belongs to the science and technology field. This phenomenon has its positive effect as a small piece of information often becomes an impulse for more in-depth professional research thus involving more information for analytical reading and reproduction. What is more important through students' news reports tutors may come to realize real learners' needs. Students choices and preferences in the selection of topics help to optimize the choice of supplementary materials and it can be taken into account in the syllabus construction later.

So the free topic choice remains the basic principal for the activity organisation. For many learners it is an opportunity to express their intelligence, technical expertise and ultimately personality. A more informal lay-out allows for a variety of speech forms and establishes an integral collaborative atmosphere. The communicative interaction based on real-life developments provides opportunities for positive relationships to develop among the learners and between the learners and teachers.

The true value of all the work around the news is placing any piece of information into a broader social, political, scientific or technological context. This can be accomplished with teacher's aid through eliciting ideas to see a bigger picture. Realistically a broader context requires life experience and certain wisdom to balance a variety of opinions. No doubt the brief session has a tangible educative power.

Teachers' Challenges. To some teachers the practice may seem daunting, distracting or trivial compared to the 'serious' syllabus-oriented work of teaching. Too much of the unexpected and unpredictable comes into play. There is never ready-made scenario. The pressure of the necessity to be constantly in good enough shape to maintain the process both informatively and linguistically might seem overwhelming. With no constraints on the fields and geography of the information the pressure is only increasing. It would probably be right to presume that the technique will work in the hands of a tutor who himself takes a strong interest in the world developments, enjoys being aware and is quite enthusiastic about sharing information. In fact, the enthusiasm of a tutor is a permanent source of every kind of initiative, the one under discussion is no exception. Being enthusiastic, capable of creating friendly atmosphere, able to discern boredom or discomfort are just a few prerequisites of successful implementation of the technique.

Linguistic instrumentation. The linguistic challenges on tutor and learners sides seem to be self-understandable. The most significant, as practice shows, is the ability to manipulate information at different levels of complexity. Students retrieve information from various sources and can work independently on the translation. However, they might not be able to reduce the information to the level of their speaking ability, to make the information sound colloquial without the tutor's assistance.

Here is a typical example to teach learners "to make" the news. In the original it reads:

Nasa and Google Form Cosmic Union

Detailed 3D images of the Moon and Mars will soon be just a click away for web users,

following a deal between search giant Google and US space agency Nasa.

Real-time weather data and the positions of the International Space Station could be included. The deal will also see scientists from both institutions working together to solve complex computational problems.

The deal formalises a partnership started last year when Google agreed to build a research centre at the Nasa Ames Research Center. Other projects may include finding new ways for humans to interact with computers as well as utilising Google's expertise to accelerate the process of searching the massive amounts of data collected by the space agency. The two organisations said they are now finalising a series of new collaborations including facilities, education and missions.

The first choice might be to try to reproduce the piece closer to the original some most prepared students could opt for. Basically the students ought to be shown a way to make the news corresponding to their actual speaking ability.

The reduced piece may look like this:

"I am going to tell you about a partnership between Google and Space Agency Nasa. Last year Google agreed to build a research centre at the Nasa Ames Research centres. On Monday the agreement was signed between the organisations. Now the scientists will work together. They will solve complex computational problems. Nasa has collected and processed more information about our planet than any other organisation in the world. All people will have access to the information. The organisations are going to co-operate in many other areas including facilities, education, missions".

To make information better understood through listening it is preferable to arrange it in the chronological sequence. It is also essential to stick to the most essential, to be logical, to use simple Grammar structures characteristic of colloquial speech. Avoiding cumbersome quotations might also be good advice. Teaching students to analyse and adapt information suiting their immediate needs is crucially important since they are normally using information far beyond their ability to reproduce it unchanged.

Usually assisting with reformulating information takes place immediately after the report. The news reformatting may further continue until being reduced to just a couple of sentences so that every single individual can reproduce it.

Interestingly, it is not only key words or structures from the news that deserve particular attention. More often than not certain words in the body of the news obviously deserve particular attention either for professional reasons or because they are really frequently used words worth remembering. Thus in the presented piece the word 'facility' is not a key one but it deserves conspicuous considera-

tion both in the IT and general English contexts for this category of learners.

Discussion is a natural follow-up consisting basically of complementing or arguing the facts. A natural discourse may tend to be slightly chaotic at times but it is definitely communicatively productive. It may be productive for a tutor as well since students bring up significant information he might be unaware of.

Interpreting information or making reflections is another important issue. As much as we teach learners 'to read between the lines' we can help them hear more effectively. Thus in the presented piece we may inquire into information that is in the fabric of the piece. "Who initiated the co-operation between Google and Nasa and why?" The clue might be: if Google agreed to build a research centre then, probably, it was Nasa that initiated the deal. The answer to the why-question is naturally guesswork, i.e. communication in the target language. Eventually, it may become clear that some research needs to be done about the both organisations to better understand the likely Nasa's initiative and its choice of Google. Thus, the news may trigger a chain of reports giving more in-depth understanding of the subject. Shared background knowledge is a key factor in building a sense of community in the classroom. and every reference to a shared experience reinforces a spirit of intimacy and camaraderie within the class.

Major Benefits. What are the benefits we achieve through the practice?

The cognitive and educative aspects of news exchange are apparent. In the linguistic dimension several advantages could be mentioned, among them speaking and listening skills benefit the most. Analytical reading is also an indispensable element of the news actualisation. The vocabulary is incremented at a higher pace compared with the results of many other class activities given the same amount of time. Specifically, the experience provides a context for a wider range of domains of meaning. It may come as a revelation for IT students that a so familiar "store" (computer memory) is a large shop, or "drive" (short for disk drive in computing) may mean 'determination'.

The practice appears to be self-stimulating. The news item often turns out to be disputable not because a tutor has been skilful enough to engage the learners into speaking but because the content of the news can't possibly leave the audience indifferent. Even those in our classroom who are not fans of football, for example, are willing to speak their minds on Ukraine's national football team successes and failures. Even quieter individu-

als, always available in any group, are drawn along by the real, maybe life-shaping events. The emotional involvement boosts productivity of acquiring vocabulary and related structures. 'Learners find themselves under pressure of utilising their entire language potential to communicate successfully. In the circumstances short spontaneous utterances of a more passive category of students are more valuable at large than lengthy reflections of generally active students.

Observed Downsides. As long as the activity remains in the zone of students free choice there is always a risk of it being played down. Occasionally students have no news to tell. Unless the tutor comes up with a suggestion the activity may fail. Collaborative news-making is not a bad alternative in the case.

The freedom of speech is the cause of some inequality of chances to perform. Some more competent in English students, incidentally they are more responsive to any information, tend to be always at the forefront. When failing to orchestrate the equality of chances I resort to the principal: let more competent students excel at this more creative part of the lesson to set example for the rest. Anyway it is possible to compensate for the inequality further on in the class-work.

'Whenever a learner tries to produce utterances in a foreign language he relies on all sorts of knowledge that might help him. His native language affects speech production which is called "transfer". We discriminate between positive and negative transfer'. When faced up to the task of rendering the news from the native language, students easily manipulate structures coinciding with corresponding structures of the native language. Contrasting structures, however, present considerable difficulty and give rise to significant errors. This negative transfer is inevitable in the practice. It has to be dealt with to the best of tutor's ability within the affordable time.

Certain oversimplifying of linguistic issues does occur. But keeping in mind IT students are not learning a foreign language to be linguists or grammarians, the compromise is quite reasonable in the face of developing sociolinguistic compe-

tence of the learners. 'By removing the idea that there is such a thing as an ideal or "right" way to teach we free teachers and trainees to explore and learn and find the best ways for themselves and for the students'

Survey results. Any activity to bring fruit has to be persistent enough to see the results. It is really important for learners to know: the chance to deliver "a great story" is always there, to anticipate it and to prepare for it. The survey on the feasibility of breaking current news conducted anonymously, has shown unanimous support for the procedure. The students emphasize the importance of going beyond the IT context of learning English because it broadens their world horizons. Besides indications of the obvious enjoyment of the process as such, there were sensible arguments like: 'the news discussion gives an impulse for paying attention at certain social events we have never thought of before.' or 'it is the most interesting part of class work', or 'it is the only place we can talk about all the things in English'.

The process of incorporating news session didn't always go smoothly but today it is clear it is working. The fact is the activity neither gets obsolete nor loses its edge in time.

Conclusions. With a small number of formal English language lessons the news exchange has established itself as a social interaction activity with substantial potential of broadening students social, political, economic outlook. The appropriate linguistic and methodological support of the activity gives a way to developing various forms of training skills in analytical reading, listening comprehension, speaking and even writing. The practice may be viewed as a class-centred technology in teaching foreign languages. Careful implementation of the techniques involved can, on the one hand, minimize the observed downsides and, on the other hand, maximize the creative potential of both teachers and learners. There needs to be a greater awareness among educators of the nature of this experience.

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