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ORACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY – DEVELOPING SPEAKING COMPETENCE FOR REAL WORLD INTERACTIONS

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Abstract: *Communication is a fundamental skill for the existence and survival of societies. In the learning of a foreign language, classroom practice should focus with priority on developing communicative skills. Oracy, a term coined by Andrew Wilkinson in 1965, is defined as the ability to express oneself efficiently, effectively, and fluently. Having strong oracy skills involves the capacity to structure one's thoughts in a way that is comprehensible to others, and accurate control of both vocabulary and grammar, in order to transmit a clear message. In the same way that literacy is essential for reading and writing, oracy is necessary for becoming a good speaker and listener. This paper will define oracy as a language teaching strategy, establish an oracy framework, and detail on oracy subskills. The practical part takes a pedagogical approach to the concept of oracy and underlines its importance in the teaching of a foreign language by integrating oracy skills and sub-skills in an applied discussion exemplified by concrete classroom practice.*

Keywords: oracy, communication, skills, foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

Any language teacher aiming to develop long-lasting communicative abilities in the classroom is fully aware of the importance of oracy for language development. Coined by the British researcher Andrew Wilkinson in 1965, the term "oracy" was first used to describe one's ability to express oneself fluently in speech [1]. Simply put, oracy is for communication what numeracy is to mathematics. In broader terms, it relates to possessing a wide collection of lexical items, paired with good structure and organization skills, deployed in order to transmit a coherent and comprehensive message.

In the language classroom, oracy pivots on the ability to communicate thoughts, ask and answer questions, and engage in meaningful interactions. Against this background, we can define oracy through a two-fold approach: (a) as an outcome, as students produce fluent and effective discourse, (b) as a process, as students learn through speaking, deepen their understanding of the language through dialogues, and develop their communicative skills through oral interactions [2].

This article will focus on discussing oracy as a process with an emphasis on particularly building listening and speaking skills.

2. Oracy Skills Framework

Acquiring an oracy skillset entails gaining vocabulary to express thoughts and ideas, as well as grammar in order to accurately build effective messages. Developing a specific oracy skillset ultimately results in students' gaining confidence and becoming persuasive communicators. Furthermore, it involves the acquisition and practice of critical thinking abilities that are so much needed nowadays.

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Conceptualizing oracy subskills hinges on a combination of different elements. We will develop them below, with the specification that some of the characteristics of spoken language should not be treated separately, as distinct elements, since some definitions may overlap.

✓ Physical elements refer to an adequate manner of delivery, mainly underlined by the pace of speaking and tonal variations, that include volume and pitch, and clarity of pronunciation. A speaker also demonstrates engagement with the audience by using appropriate face expressions and by maintaining a sweeping eye contact with the listeners. Gestures and posture should not be exaggerating and distracting, but reflect the speaker's awareness of the degree of formality of the situation and their ability to tailor discourse to the context of their public performance.

✓ Linguistic features impact on the quality of an oral presentation, through the display of apt and varied lexical choices (often including correct use of relevant specific terminology) and of accurate grammar structures, efficiently deployed in order to render a comprehensible message (choice of tenses, embedded constructions, conditional clauses or modal expressions). In the same category, the correct selection and employment of register demonstrates awareness of the social context, by timely adaptation to the relative formality of a situation. Rhetoric also plays an important role in developing oracy. According to Wells, good speakers "are able to use devices such as metaphor, simile anecdote and jokes, to enhance meaning and build rapport with the listeners" [3].

✓ Cognitive aspects of the discourse relate to an accurate choice of content to convey meaning and intention and, equally important, to engage the audience, establish shared understanding, promote reactions, and build on the listeners' contribution and feedback. Structure and organization are two important instruments that must be correctly used in order to ensure that the selection and the construction of the message are clear and comprehensible. As different genres have different patterns of organization and modes of interaction, the speaker must be aware that their talk should be well-adapted to the situational conventions. For instance, a presentation entails delivering information, debating involves expressing and reconciling different (sometimes opposing) opinions, while a group discussion is aimed at pursuing and finding a commonly agreed upon solution to a shared task. Furthermore, effective oracy hones a wide array of cognitive skills, such as explanation, clarification, summarizing and paraphrasing, expressing and developing arguments, all of which are deployed against a critical approach to and delivery of the oral communicative task.

✓ Social and emotional skills reflect good leadership abilities. Speakers not only present information, but also manage the engagement of the audience by controlling the reactions of the listeners. These skills include interaction management, respecting turn-taking conventions, using active listening and tolerating others' opinions and arguments. Being considerate of the audience's level of understanding is another way of illustrating the speaker's good judgement and sensitivity regarding the listeners' prior knowledge, expected language proficiency, and interests.

Against this background, we strongly believe that improving oracy should revolve around four essential skillsets: [4]

1. Reasoning and evidence. The ability to use this pair of cognitive skills clearly demonstrates that students can communicate effectively. Since in this context, effective communication depends on the level of persuasion deployed in discourse, it is only normal that becoming a persuasive communicator be linked to developing strong argumentation skills. Practising oracy (in classroom activities such as debates and group discussions) facilitates the development of cognitive

skills by activating prior knowledge and linking it with newly acquired content.

2. Listening and responding. These two skills imply students' engagement either with their teacher or with their peers, an interaction which requires asking appropriate questions and/or giving suitable responses. In this context, teaching oracy improves social awareness and fosters the development of emotional skills, by offering learners an opportunity to become active listeners.

3. Expression and delivery. Linked to the improvement of persuasive skills, these two abilities refer to an informed selection of appropriate vocabulary and the employment of effective rhetoric skills aimed to actively engage the audiences. Thus, oracy skills help eliminating public speaking apprehensions by offering contextualized practice of body language and non-verbal cues during public presentations.

4. Organization and prioritization. Oracy facilitates the development of communicative skills by honing cognitive skills that have to do with structure and organization. Organized discourse is reflected by the use of sequentially structured ideas, which can be achieved by prioritization of thoughts and ideas. It ultimately refers to discriminating between main points and supporting details, embedding them in the message at the right time and with maximum efficiency.

3. How to Teach Oracy – General Guidelines

Students achieve easiness in using a language when the focus of the class is on receiving and conveying authentic messages. These communicative instances are based on interaction which translates as collaborative exchange, involving "the establishment of a triangular relationship between the sender, the receiver and the context of the situation" [5].

Through interaction, which presupposes not only the expression of the one's ideas, but also the comprehension of those of others (including listening and responding), students get the experience of enhancing their linguistic knowledge, by listening or reading authentic material, of using their linguistic knowledge, by contextualizing the grammar and the vocabulary that they have previously acquired and of demonstrating language creativity by building discourse based on genuine input (oral or written).

Translated into teaching objectives, these aspects materialize into concrete aims of any oracy-oriented class:

- developing oral presentation skills;
- building on group discussion/debates skills;
- problem-solving skills;
- leadership skills [6].

While employing interactive activities that promote oracy, a number of pedagogical features must be taken into consideration:

- input should be authentic – classroom materials should be based on real-life discourse samples (oral and written media, for example);
- topics should be relevant and pertinent – they should match the students' interests, their level of understanding and background knowledge;
- learning focus should be on language functions and their usage – practice situations should be meaningful and provide an opportunity for realistic deployments of language functions, not only grammar or vocabulary divorced of context;
- interaction should be real – the communicative contexts should offer a real chance to debate on timely issues, to discuss relevant topics or to solve real-life problems;
- teachers should act as facilitators – they should only monitor the process of the activity, providing learners with the necessary scaffolding (resources, correction, feedback, regulatory measures).

4. A Practical Approach to Developing Oracy

Employing different patterns of interaction in the language classroom facilitates the achievement of three types of competence: (1) participative competence – the ability to actively engage in communicative situations; (2) interactional competence – the ability to interact appropriately with other students in order to share information and knowledge; (3) academic competence – the ability to acquire new information and use it in a meaningful way.

In what follows, we will list five modalities that promote oracy skills through interactive language learning activities.

1. Brainstorming or group sessions

These are very powerful techniques that encourage students to talk and share information. They can be successfully used as warm-up or lead-in activities, suited for creating an anticipatory attitude before a more complex sequence [7]. Besides activating prior knowledge, such activities dwell on critical thinking, as students discuss a topic/an issue by defining it, enumerating its characteristics / features/elements, debating on the advantages and disadvantages, expressing and argumenting personal points of view, clarifying them and developing active listening skills, while having to acknowledge and understand other opinions.

2. Pair and share activities

More than often, extending communication beyond simple conversation practice may prove a challenging task for educators. With this approach, students work with a partner in order to answer a question, discuss a topic, or solve a problem. The main objective of such activities should focus on agreeing upon a final answer/conclusion/solution, for the reaching of which students have to exchange thoughts and ideas with their partners, while building on active listening skills. Such a framework opens multiple opportunities for learners to work collaboratively, questioning each other and sharing information, to apply turn-taking conventions, to share information, to practice a variety of language functions, and ultimately to better manage social situations.

3. Making an oral presentation on a specific topic

One of the most effective ways to teach oracy is to have students deliver oral presentations to the entire class. Undoubtedly, such an activity must be preceded by a lesson on what makes a good presentation, in which aspects regarding selection of topic and content, structure and organization patterns, language, register and style, and delivery should be presented and illustrated to the learners. Plenary oral presentations are a great opportunity for students to develop confidence, fluency and effective delivery skills. The audience also has a chance to actively listen and engage in follow-up discussions, in which they reactivate prior knowledge while acquiring new content.

4. Working in groups to discuss an issue and reach an agreement

Group discussions and debates are extremely complex contexts for integrating language, cognitive and leadership skills [8]. Taking part in a group discussion, either as a leader or as a participant, gives students an opportunity to practice and improve contextualized vocabulary and grammar, language functions, and critical thinking skills. Students get a chance to express their opinions on a debatable topic and support their point of view with pertinent arguments, which they have to justify and defend. Reaching consensus at the end of the activity involves critical assessment and evaluation, negotiating and persuasion, high-level cognitive abilities that are a must in nowadays society, which is dominated by an infusion of fake news and information for the analysis of which we must equip students with the appropriate deconstruction instruments. The oracy skills deployed during such a complex activity are numerous and include the afore-mentioned

ones: reasoning and evidence, listening and responding, expression and delivery, organization and prioritization.

5. Q&A sessions

Effectively employed as follow-up sequences at the end of any activity, question and answer sessions, conducted in pairs, small groups or with the entire class, are an essential element of oracy-building strategies. They are a great way of checking comprehension at the end of a teaching sequence, after a presentation or as a consolidation after a discussion and gives students a chance to interact and answer each other's questions and clarify possible misunderstandings.

Focusing all oracy-based activities on the four elements of the skillset discussed in the article will definitely provide a clear and coherent framework for both learning and assessment.

5. Conclusion

Although this article focused mainly on developing oracy skills from the perspective of a process-based approach, there is definitely much to be said about the topic. However, the most pertinent conclusion that can be drawn from the theoretical and practical discussion is that introducing oracy as a stand-alone skill in the language classroom has a myriad of benefits. It engages students beyond mere conversation practice and boots learning outcomes in all four skills, thus further motivating students to confidently handle instruction. Oracy definitely promotes critical thinking, an important skillset not only in class but also outside it. Students who think critically are better informed, take better decisions, develop creativity and become more inquisitive about the world around them and understand it better, which makes them better adapted to the realities of the 21st century. Studies have also shown that practising oracy supports students' memory. Practicing a language orally consolidates information and builds better neuronal links that ultimately lead to longer-lasting knowledge. Psychologically, oracy is an incredible self-confidence booster. It empowers learners and equips them with the right attitude, allowing them to harness their full potential as they become functional members of the society. It shows young people that they have a voice, that their opinion matters, and that they are entitled to express their thoughts and be understood and accepted while doing so. Ultimately, oracy hones communication skills. Employers around the globe are united in the belief that communication skills are a high priority in new hires. All organizations (military or civilian) thrive on the account of effective communicators – employees that can transmit their ideas clearly and know how to listen in order to improve themselves, those around them, and the institution they represent. In the 21st century, deeply typified by social mobility and professional fluidity, the skillset acquired, practiced, and consolidated with the help of oracy is, without any shred of doubt, a sine-qua-non prerequisite of successful adaptation.

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