
THE TEACHER'S ROLE IN TALK

Doç.Dr.Recep SONGÜN

D.E.Ü.Buca Eğitim Fakültesi

İngiliz Dili Eğitimi Bölümü

Öğretim Üyesi

Language development is not something that we can understand in a short time and easily. Although there are some books written with chapters that divide children's language growth into sections separated by age, we think that it is wrong to think that one section can be grasped without a rich acquaintance with the others. No matter where and who you teach, there are good reasons for you to have a broad understanding of the processes of oral language development as they apply the age stages.

First of all it is necessary for those who teach high school children to know how children's language has developed in the earlier years, since they will meet many children at high school level who remain, in some ways at least, at a stage of linguistic and intellectual development out of step with their classmates. It is really necessary for infant teachers to know where children go in their language development after they leave the primary school, since in many ways the teaching approaches that are used in the primary school are designed to prepare children for the life and language activities that follow in later years. At the same time the secondary school teacher needs to consider both the following questions: where have the children come from in their language, and where are they going . Both are essential factors in determining what the secondary school teacher can or should do with students in the secondary school.

And it is also necessary for teachers to have knowledge in breadth about language development which is related to the role of the teaching profession as it

continues to change towards the end of the twentieth century. People have to be versatile if they are planning to be teachers these days, and if they are teachers; few teachers today can expect to spend all their teaching days only in a primary, infant or secondary school without meeting some teaching at one or more of the other level. We believe that nothing offers a better insight into the development and the interests of children, at every level, than a broad grasp of their linguistic development. On the same point, since parents are also inevitably interested in the language development of their children, there is no knowledge more useful and attractive to parents than a knowledge of the directions and potentials of their children's language.

Apart from their children's physical and emotional well-being, nothing is more important to their education in these years than their oral language development. Their physical and emotional well-being itself may largely depend on that development.

The teacher is the main factor to foster students' oral language at this level. For this reason they have a big responsibility for their students' language development. This responsibility is more when they teach the students who are in prep-class. In this class all of the teachers have to be very careful, because the teacher earns the small child's trust and respect by revealing genuine friendliness, unconditional acceptance, warmth, empathy and interest in all dealings with the child. A "quality" developed in the one-to-one relationship makes language flow (Corson, 1988:41). It becomes worthwhile and exciting for students to talk freely. We know that in the act of talking freely they learn their language and the target language.

We would like to give some suggestions which will help the prep-class teachers promote the "quality" right from start.

Firstly, teachers can give something of themselves to students. Topics should build upon the students' own personal experiences and knowledge; and within this framework teachers can talk extensively about themselves and their thoughts. Teachers might make up stories about their own child-hoods, some brief anecdotes which reflect the feelings and thoughts of the less secure student. Students can then

identify with these experiences. They are more easily encouraged to relate and speak, even about their most dreaded concerns (Corson, 1988:42). In these situations, behaving gently while talking, can create a wonderful change in the student.

Teachers do not know enough about the past events to which children refer in order to provide a good framework for talk. A consistency and continuity in the relationship is needed to compensate for this. We should not forget that shared experiences over a long period contribute here. These foster the two-way talk which allows the teacher to know the students, a knowledge which is essential to furthering their oral language development.

In addition to this, we should remember the fact that being listened to is a powerful form of motivation for people talking, small children no less than adults. If no one is listening, small children lose interest in seeking information, in putting forward their plans, ideas and hopes just like adults. By really listening the teacher can seek more from the students, help them identify the issues, ideas, feelings, and help give them names. There is considerable hypocrisy in educational efforts to develop listening skills in students if teachers betray none themselves.

All students like to ask questions. We, as English teachers, should give our students the freedom of asking questions. The attentive teacher responds to the "whys" of students with patience, and a care to expanding their interests, not closing them off. As some students will ask more "why" questions than others, these can be used as introductions for wider talk with groups of students (Brearley, 1969). It is often the case that some students will seem to have no interest in asking "why". These students may have been frustrated in earlier situations by not having their "why" questions responded to. They have lost interest in asking "why", but their interest remains. There is a real risk of reinforcing in school, and perpetuating for some students, their lack of interest in "why" questions. There is research to suggest that those students who initiate a great deal of talk get teacher initiations in return, while those who initiate infrequently are not frequently sought out by teachers (Cazden, 1972). And this shows that foreign language teachers should allow their students to ask questions in every situation so that the students get motivated to

talk. Teachers need to show that they are available for more than routine teaching, that they are prepared to talk, play and help. Again, listening to the student is important here. Students arriving in school often have news to share. Especially after the weekends there may be very interesting subjects (for instance, sports) to talk about. It can be a great fun to discuss the results of the games. In this way teachers can create a good atmosphere in the class. There is the closeness and empathy derived from teacher and student talking together about shared experiences.

When teaching we should not ignore the psychological aspect of teaching and learning. Tough (1977, 1979) discusses teachers' assumptions about their roles and their relevance for classroom talk. She offers warnings to teachers who hold authoritarian attitudes towards classroom management. Where students must learn first to be obedient and conform without question, without justification being offered, talk in that classroom may be over-concerned with control and students may never experience talk that will extend their thinking. Good manners can be promoted in discussion, for example (Corson, 1988). They are best promoted in school by the teacher's example. Who can think that the authoritarian teacher can offer the student an example of good manners?

After YÖK (Higher Education Council) the faculties of Education began to admit "blind, deaf and lame" students. It was a big mistake to open this kind of door to those who would not be able to teach because of their physical disability. A person's voice can invite conversation, or discourage it. A soft, well-modulated voice relaxes and comforts the students. A breadth of functions of language used by the teacher promotes better receptive language in students; "quality" teacher language involves such informative abstract uses as reasoning, predicting, empathizing and imagining. Use of these functions reduces the need for as much imperative and administrative talk. Teachers can ask some questions to gauge the effectiveness of their talk with students: "Is our talk a two-way interchange?"; "Who does most of the talking?"; "Is my body position, in relation to the student, an encouraging one, a threatening one, or does it express uninterest?"; and, "Are my questions 'thought-promoting' or are they merely 'correct answer' questions?"

There are some teachers who cause the dialogue to be deadening for child talk. The reason for this is that many teachers tend to get short answers after asking the questions. And children's answers tend to be short and uninvolved. Teachers pay more attention to framing their own questions than to the children's views in return. This takes the pressure off the child. Where a teacher's question follows on from a child's opening statement, it will express interest in furthering the talk (Corson: 45). It may also expand the topic especially if it is related to the child's remembered experiences. In asking questions the aim must not be to learn whether the students know what the teacher knows. A sequence of open questions can stimulate and develop logical thinking. Teachers should choose their questions with care and place them in a logical pattern.

The teacher's role is to provide situations in which the students feel "at home" in their talk style. Children from different social backgrounds differ in their oral language interactions with teachers. Children from low income families often ask fewer questions, when compared with other children. They may approach teachers less often for contact, conversation or involvement. In developing talk in all students teachers need to provide contexts more meaningful for the child so that every child in the class can find something interesting to talk about. The teacher's role in oral language work becomes a vital one for these children if they are to gain influence over their own lives and affairs as members of the community in future.

Designers of programs for the language development of students from different groups should suggest methods or models that may have or produce long-term gains.

To sum up, we can say that pre-class teachers, if they want to foster talk, should listen to students; give them something real to talk; encourage and make time for conversation and dialogue; use questions with care, in generating and developing language; develop an atmosphere of trust and respect; and maintain a consistency and continuity in their relationships with students.

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