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An analysis of the effects of speaking activities on reluctant speakers

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Abstract. The current paper aims to examine how cultural, linguistic, psychological and affective factors influence Romanian navy learners' reluctance to speak in class, despite their request for more conversation. I hypothesized that the current methods of instructions did not provide enough support to help learners overcome their reluctance to speak during communicative activities. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to establish a defensible procedure for adapting and/or supplementing the available learning materials.

Romanian learners, particularly in low-level classes, tend to be reluctant to participate in classroom activities that require them to move beyond very controlled speaking tasks to more spontaneous, less predictable spoken interactions. There are numerous reasons why students might be reluctant to participate in freer speaking activities. My own impression was that the reluctance to speak on the part of the learner was caused by a combination of factors. These included: lack of confidence in their speaking abilities, a fear of making mistakes, difficulties interacting under real time pressures of spoken language, anxiety, and lack of motivation. This section looks at these factors along with other potential factors identified by writers in the field of TESOL.

Burns and Joyce (1997) provide a useful framework for organizing factors that may cause reluctance on the part of the learner to take part in classroom tasks involving spoken interactions. They identify three sets of factors: cultural factors, linguistic factors, and psychological and affective factors. Cultural factors derive from learners' prior learning experiences and the expectations created by these experiences. Linguistic factors relate to problems learners might have transferred aspects of the language system from their first language to English. Psychological and affective factors include culture shock, lack of motivation to learn English, and anxiety or shyness in class. These three sets of factors shall be used to organize this current paper.

The educational background of the learners under scrutiny is quite diverse ranging from civil high schools to military environments. Some of the associated learning problems of these learners include accuracy-based learning techniques, such as memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules, passive learning styles, strictly defined classroom roles, and insufficient opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Similar cultural problems are identified by Burns and Joyce (1997). They suggest that the following are potential factors contributing to learners' reluctance to speak: a belief that language learning is based primarily on reading and writing from a textbook and completing written exercises; and unfamiliarity with communicative and learner-centered approaches to learning and expectations of teacher and learner roles.

These beliefs about language learning and expectations of what should go on in the language classroom are no doubt aspects brought with Romanian learners to the language school classroom, however, my own experience has shown that Romanian learners readily adapt to new types of activities that they have not experienced during their formal education. For example, Romanian learners, providing they have been given sufficient guidance, eagerly participate in activities such as controlled information gap activities and language games, despite their previous passive learning experiences. My

own impression is that learners come to language courses at the Naval Academy to study with military instructors well aware that learning experiences will be different from those in the Romanian education system. Given that learners generally enroll on general English courses to improve their speaking skills, it would seem that, although it is useful to be aware of learners' prior learning experiences, these factors should not directly cause any major problems in this particular learning context providing that learners can see the benefits of communicative activities.

An additional cultural factor that could be added to Burns and Joyce's list of cultural factors is that Romanian learners do not have opportunities to use English in their daily lives (Chayanuvat, 1996; Wiriyaichitra, 2002). The opportunities to speak English are severely limited and that for many the only contact they have with English is in the language classroom. This is an important point to keep in mind when planning lessons as learners only meet with military instructors for a limited time per year. With such limited exposure to English there is a need to devote as much of the available time as possible to speaking, and learners cannot be expected to remember language items from one class to the next as is required in order for traditional methods of instruction to be effective. Unlike an ESL setting where learners have opportunities outside of class to use and experiment with the language that they learn in class, in an EFL setting these opportunities need to be created during class.

The aim of English language learning during Romanian learners' formal education is mainly concerned with building up an extensive knowledge of grammar rules and vocabulary in order to prepare students for multiple choice examinations. As a result of this prior learning experience, many learners would consider the need for accuracy as a major contributing aspect to the problems that they encounter when trying to speak English. Pronunciation is an additional problem for Romanian speakers caused by a combination of first language (L1) interference and a lack of exposure to spoken English. Wiriyaichitra (2002) considers interference from the mother tongue as one of the main obstacles preventing learners from communicating effectively in English. Burns and Joyce (1997) provide a list of linguistic factors related to first language interference: difficulties in transferring from the learner's first language to the sounds, rhythms, and stress patterns of English; difficulties with the native speaker pronunciation of the teacher; and a lack of understanding of common grammatical patterns in English (e.g., English tenses) and how these may be different from their own language.

I accept that these factors are part of the cause of Romanian learners' reluctance to speak and therefore need to be addressed by the materials used in the classroom. Phonology is a particularly important area for Romanian learners whose lack of opportunities to practise speaking and listening to English beyond isolated words and sentences, often with a heavy Romanian accent during their formal education, cause problems during communication. English grammar also causes problems for Romanian learners, however, particularly for low-level learners, a major part of the problem is a fear of making grammatical errors while speaking and to a lesser degree their lack of understanding as suggested by Burns and Joyce.

An additional linguistic problem for Romanian learners is a lack of awareness of features of natural spoken discourse that are employed to facilitate spoken interactions. Based on analysis of natural first language talk, Bygate (1987) argues that in addition to developing motor-perceptive skills (skills in accurately producing and perceiving language), it is necessary to develop interaction skills (skills in transferring motor-perceptive skills to real life communicative encounters). Learners' reluctance to speak may be caused by the fact that they are unable to make this transfer. Bygate (1987) argues that in order to achieve this transfer learners need to learn how to cope with two different demands which affect speakers during interactive encounters. These are processing conditions and reciprocity conditions.

Processing conditions are the time constraints under which language is produced, i.e. speakers have to decide what to say, how to say it, say it, and check that their intended meaning has been realized all under the pressure of time. The language that is produced under these conditions tends to be far more disorganized and chaotic than written language. For Romanian learners, whose language learning experiences have mainly involved language in its written form with a tendency to place a heavy emphasis on forming grammatically accurate sentences, it is not difficult to imagine some of the difficulties that genuine spoken language must cause.

Reciprocity conditions are the real time demands present during actual communication between two or more participants. This requires that the speakers manage the interaction in order to successfully exchange meanings with others. Bygate (1987) explains that, "in a reciprocal exchange, a speaker will often have to adjust his or her vocabulary and message to take the listener into account. The speaker also has to participate actively in the interlocutor's message – asking questions, reacting. and so on" (p. 8). There is very little evidence of active participation between speakers in Romanian learners' spoken language and they would therefore benefit from exposure to, and practice in ways of managing interaction as it develops between two or more interlocutors.

My own impression is that a lack of understanding of common tools employed to help speakers produce and negotiate talk under the constraints found in real life interactions is one of the factors affecting learners during communicative speaking activities. Useful references that provide explanations and examples of linguistic devices that native speakers employ to maintain the flow of spoken language include, in addition to Bygate (1987); Burns and Joyce (1997); Carter and McCarthy (1997); McCarthy (1991); and Richards (1990). Appropriate features of spoken grammar that might help learners facilitate and negotiate their interactions in order to overcome specific problems could be selected from the above resources and incorporated into speaking materials.

Regarding psychological and affective factors that can contribute to learners' reluctance to speak, Burns and Joyce (1997) provide the following list: culture shock, especially where newly arrived immigrants are coming to terms with the effects of resettlement in a new country; previous negative social or political experiences, such as war or personal trauma, lack of motivation, especially where they may not have chosen to learn, have negative views of the TL (target language) culture or do not see a purpose in learning the language, anxiety and shyness in class, especially if their previous learning experiences were negative, and perceptions, some of which may also be cultural (e.g. they are too old to learn a new language).

For the learners involved in the current paper, psychological factors such as culture shock and previous negative social or political experiences are irrelevant. This is due to the fact that they are all Romanians studying English in Romania, in a stable social and political environment. Lack of motivation, anxiety and shyness, and learner perceptions, on the other hand, are more likely to be contributing factors.

Nunan (1999) argues that motivation is a key consideration in determining the preparedness of learners to communicate and Skehan (1989) asserts that motivation is the second highest predictor of success in language learning (with aptitude being the greatest predictor). It would therefore be worthwhile considering the factors in the current paper that might have positive or negative effects on learners' motivation to speak. Regarding lack of motivation, the Romanian learners are unlikely to be affected by the factors suggested by Burns and Joyce (i.e. learners may not have chosen to learn, have negative views of the TL culture or do not see a purpose in learning the language) as learners on the GE program at the Naval Academy generally choose to study English, have a positive attitude toward the TL and its culture, and have expressed their main purpose in studying English, which is to learn how to speak.

Motivation is, however, a broad area and there are aspects of it that can contribute to the reluctance to speak. Dornyei (1998) suggests seven dimensions to motivation, two of which are particularly relevant to the learners under scrutiny: the affective dimension and the self-concept-related dimension. The affective dimension covers, among others factors, enjoyment and interest. The self-concept-related dimension includes factors such as lack of confidence and anxiety.

My own experience in the classroom has taught me that Romanian are much more motivated to participate in activities that they consider to be enjoyable. More directly related to the classroom, Chayanuvat (1996), in her book about creating materials, argues that fun is an essential ingredient that needs to be incorporated into a lesson form for successful learning to take place. It is true that students are more motivated to participate in activities that they consider enjoyable. This cultural expectation obviously needs to be a major priority when planning classwork, and ways of integrating fun into effective learning activities need to be considered.

The second factor in the affective dimension that I consider important for motivating Romanian learners is interest. Harmer (1991) makes a distinction between two different types of motivation which is useful when considering where interest fits into the current study. These are extrinsic (related to factors outside the classroom) and intrinsic (related to factors inside the classroom) motivation. Due to the fact that teachers can exert influence more easily over what happens in the classroom, I will focus on the potential effects of interest on intrinsic motivation, paying particular attention to the extent that material designers can incorporate interest into classroom experiences.

In order to engage learners' interest in speaking tasks there is a need to provide examples of conversation that learners can relate to and activities that allow interactions to be personalized and/or localized by learners. It is difficult for commercial coursebook writers to achieve this as they are generally writing for a large audience. The result is often contexts that are unfamiliar and/or of little interest to Romanian learners. Estaire and Zanon (1994) suggest that motivation can be achieved by providing a link between materials and learners' experiential worlds, i.e. by selecting appropriate themes and related speaking tasks which, at the very least, 'smell of real life' from the learner's perspective. This view is supported by Breen and Candlin (1987) who point out that "we know from our commonsense experience that if learners are genuinely interested in the subject matter - topics and themes - referred to and expressed by the language data in the materials, then they are likely to be motivated to make sense of those data and seek meaning from them". (pp. 19-20) For Romanian learners, learning to speak English is already a difficult process and by removing the additional obstacle of unfamiliar and uninteresting contexts, and replacing them with more familiar and interesting ones that they can relate to their own real world, motivation to speak should be enhanced.

The activities leading to the final task need to address certain linguistic aspects associated with speaking English in order to develop learners' ability to communicate. This type of speaking focused and supportive classwork has the potential to help build individuals beliefs in themselves as speakers which would in turn generate and sustain motivation. (Williams and Burden, 1997)

An additional self-concept-related factor identified in this paper was that students were also afraid of making fools of themselves in front of their peers. In a Romanian setting student do not want to make mistakes in front of friends because the concept of 'losing face' is part of our culture. My own view is that fear of making mistakes is likely to be caused by previous learning experiences that place too much emphasis on accuracy. In order to shift learners concern for accuracy to fluency, it would be advisable to plan communicative speaking tasks that require the successful exchange of information to complete them; leaving learners free to use any language they can to achieve the task.

This review of the potential influences from cultural, linguistic, psychological and affective factors upon the Romanian learners' reluctance to speak has identified a number of issues that are important for teachers and material designers at the Main Foreign Language Center from the Naval Academy. In brief, the following are all potential problems contributing to Romanian learners' reluctance to engage in interactive speaking activities:

- opportunities to speak English are often limited during English class;
- difficulties with English grammar and phonology;
- lack of awareness about linguistic devices used to deal with the real time demands of spoken interaction;
- speaking activities are not enjoyable;
- speaking contexts found in materials are uninteresting and/or unfamiliar;
- lack of confidence in speaking ability; and
- fear of making mistakes in front of peers.

In keeping with my arguments that the factors contributing to learners' reluctance to speak are amendable to change by adapting and/or supplementing the materials, a number of important points to keep in mind when planning classwork were also presented. These included:

- provide as many opportunities as possible for learners to practise speaking;
- do not expect learners to master grammar items in one lesson;
- create opportunities to simulate real life spoken interactions in class;

- relate first language interference problems regarding grammar and pronunciation to samples of spoken language;
- create an awareness of common linguistic tools employed to help produce and negotiate spoken interactions;
- integrate fun activities into classwork;
- provide interesting and familiar (localized and personalized) themes and topics for examples of spoken language and speaking activities; and
- plan supportive sequences of activities that provide a balance between focusing on accuracy and fluency to build learners confidence to perform speaking tasks.

Lack of exposure to English in an EFL setting was identified as a cultural factor contributing to learners' reluctance to speak with the following teaching implications:

- (1) provide as many opportunities to practice speaking as possible with particular emphasis on creative speaking activities;
- (2) allow for the fact that learners do not remember everything they are taught and therefore need opportunities to recycle language that has been taught in the previous lesson; and
- (3) simulate real life spoken language in the classroom;
- (4) teach grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation within a communicative context so that learners can see the instrumental values in these aspects of the language system; and
- (5) directly teach features of spoken discourse that can help learners facilitate and negotiate their interactions.

I propose that these principles can be incorporated into the design of the existing materials by first placing communicative tasks as central to the learning process.

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