

ИНОВАЦИИ В ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО

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ENHANCING COMMUNICATION SKILLS: STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS
IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

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Abstract: *The paper presents a pedagogical account of developing and implementing an oral communication course for non-native English majors. It draws a key distinction between speaking and communication, particularly in the context of students' transition from secondary to tertiary education. The process of designing and implementing a communication course is outlined in detail, with clearly defined objectives, the major one being to enhance students' oral communication skills. The paper also outlines assessment and evaluation methods, including consideration of students' preferred topics of discussion. Finally, it outlines a range of effective strategies aimed at enhancing students' communicative competence.*

Keywords: *speaking, oral communication, communicative competence, English as a lingua franca, assessment, evaluation, educational strategies*

Introduction

The motivation of the study is grounded in the educational need to enhance oral communication skills in multilingual communicative environment where English serves as today's lingua franca of intercultural communication. Unlike the traditional face-to-face verbal interaction, currently communication is mostly carried out in various platforms and applications both synchronously and asynchronously. Such a hybrid mode boosts the level of communication convenience but also increases the cognitive load of information processing triggered by the lag in verbal exchanges. Intercultural communication in English requires the consideration of cultural diversity as well as various culture-specific, ethical and social issues to avoid clash and ensure the smooth flow of verbal and non-verbal interaction. In order to become a fluent communicator and public speaker, special training is needed, especially at the level of tertiary education, with a strong emphasis on presenting structured speech, strategies of linguistic ma-

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nipulation and techniques for achieving the stated communicative goals. The challenges that educators face in enhancing communication competence in English go far beyond acquiring pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar skills. Communication competence is deeply rooted in pragmatics and the use of appropriate-register language in relation to the context of situation. In communication classes, it is also important to consider the general linguistic profile of English as the language of global communication with reference to its flexibility, adaptability and full-spectrum modality.

The present study explores the integration of the oral communication class mainly in the context of higher education with reference to the succession and continuity between secondary and tertiary education in Bulgaria. Both written and oral communication skills in view of the particular communicative situation are considered and figure extensively in the Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (KCLL). Such skills are defined with reference to literacy competence, multilingual competence, digital competence, citizenship competence, entrepreneurship competence, as well as cultural awareness and expression competence. However, the key competences in school subjects (KCSS) framework in Bulgaria addresses communication skills with reference to foreign languages only marginally. Defined as skills to communicate in foreign languages (communicative competences), the oral ones have to do mainly with presenting public statements on various moral, worldly, and civic issues or with improving speaking skills. They are mostly associated with understanding and expressing ideas, facts, opinions, feelings, and relations in familiar situations both orally and in writing. High school students' oral communication skills are further enhanced through various extracurricular activities, such as debate clubs and public speaking contests. Although such communicative skills and competences promote meaningful interaction and serve as essential foundations for students to become fluent English speakers capable of discussing global issues, communication proficiency is developed predominantly at the level of higher education.

In order to illustrate the transition from secondary to higher education regarding the refinement of oral interaction skills, it is necessary to highlight the overlap and dissimilarities between communication and speaking with reference to enhancing communicative competence in teaching English as a foreign language:

- Communication – “[it] refers to the transmission and reception of information (a ‘message’) between a source and a receiver using a signalling system: in linguistic contexts, source and receiver are interpreted in human terms, the system involved is a language, and the notion of response to [...] the message [is] of crucial importance” (Crystal 2008: 89).

- Speaking – “meaningful interaction between people using words” (Bleistein, Lewis & Smith 2020: 1).

- Communicative competence – “a speaker’s grammatical competence plus knowledge of the rules and conventions governing the accurate, appropriate and effective use of the language in a wide range of social settings” (Brown & Miller 2013: 88).

Both speaking and social interaction are prerequisites for fostering students' communicative competence, as they not only involve the ability to express statements and opinions clearly but also require understanding of context, audience, and appropriate language use across diverse communicative situations. However, speaking as a means of meaningful interaction is mastered mostly at the level of secondary education, while communication skills in general, and in academic environment in particular, are acquired mostly at the level of tertiary education. As a whole, developing speaking skills is a prerequisite for mastering communication skills with proficient speakers of English.

Methodology

The oral communication course with second year students of English Studies and Applied Linguistics with English as their first foreign language was designed and implemented as an elective course at the Faculty of Modern Languages, University of Veliko Tarnovo, Bulgaria in the academic year 2019 – 2020 to meet the demands of the transition from secondary to tertiary education as stated above. While speaking often involves one person delivering a monologue, communication invariably involves interlocutors, i.e. a speaker and addressee/s who engage in meaningful interaction, either in the form of a monologue or a dialogue. The course attracts a large number of students who are eager to enrol, which

is why there is a trend to offer it every semester or form cohorts of students in case the course is offered once per academic year. Regarding the continuity of academic curricula, the English oral communication course at BA level precedes the English academic communication course, which is offered at MA and PhD levels with a strong emphasis on advanced research presentation skills in scholarly context. Adler, Rodman & du Pré (2020: 6) define communication as “the process of creating meaning through symbolic interaction” highlighting the fact that communication is relational (see also Adler et al. 2018). As such, interpersonal communication bonds students and facilitates partnerships within peer groups, with an emphasis on encoding and decoding messages in ways that help avoid communication breakdowns or potential miscommunication and verbal conflict, which are key factors of consideration in the development of the course.

When placing communication within a theoretical framework, one should take into consideration the physical, physiological and psychological factors that might cause misunderstanding and hinder communication, referred to as *noise*, as well as the channel of communication and the communicative environment (Adler, Rodman & du Pré 2020: 8–9). The selection of the proper channel, i.e. in-person communication vs. remote communication, as well as both physical and socio-cultural environment, are factors to consider in order to evoke a particular response in the addressee (Bavelas 2022). The theoretical perspective of the course also benefits from the inclusion of non-verbal communication mainly with focus on body language highlighting both common and culture-specific gestures, facial expressions, posture, eye contact, personal space, tone of voice, etc. (Wharton 2009, White & Gardner 2012, Müller et al. 2014, Kostić & Chadee 2015, Adler, Rodman & du Pré 2020: 155–177, Lubienetzki & Schüler-Lubienetzki 2022). The culture-specific aspects of communication merit particular attention especially with reference to English as the global language of communication in a multicultural environment. For successful intercultural communication, which is increasingly conducted in English, students should be well aware of the distinction between individualistic cultures vs. collectivistic cultures and their specific features regarding communicative behaviour, as well as of the distinction between high-context culture vs. low-context culture (Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov 2010, Reynolds & Valentine 2011, Rings & Rasinger 2020, Adler, Rodman & du Pré 2020: 77–86).

The need for students to master the essence of communication and the close relationship between communication and culture, outlined above, has provided the necessary impetus for developing the course. In order for the course to be effective, a native speaker of English should be involved to demonstrate mostly the cultural aspects of the communication process as well as to highlight cultural sensitivity on certain issues, which are to be addressed with caution. The following objectives of the English communication course have been set prior to its inclusion in the curriculum:

- Enhancing students’ speaking and communication skills acquired in secondary education
- Enhancing the prevention of fossilized errors, mainly related to pronunciation as well as grammatical and lexical errors
 - Mastering communicative skills for both monologue and dialogue
 - Mastering skills for drafting and presenting structured speech
 - Mastering skills for argumentative and persuasive communication
 - Mastering academic and non-academic communication skills
 - Mastering intercultural communication skills
 - Gaining competences for employment in the field of communication services
 - Gaining competences for negotiations with international partners
 - Gaining conflict resolution competences

The method of teaching includes lectures on the psychology of communication, political correctness, public speaking, motivational speeches, negotiating, problem solving, as well as practical activities related to linguistic manipulation, role playing, leadership competences, debating, life coaching, self-fulfillment, personal growth, inclusive language, plain English, etc. The major communicative drills employed in the course focus on various rhetorical devices, techniques of persuasion, getting one’s ideas across, defending one’s point of view, and the art of listening in communication.

The oral communication course was implemented as an elective course to supplement other practically oriented English core language courses such as vocabulary, grammar, and writing. The findings of the present study elucidate the author's six-year experience so far as the course leader of the oral communication course from its inception in 2019 through to 2025. It is a pilot course as previously there has been no course addressing the issues of developing language proficiency in relation to effective oral communication as crucial in both educational and professional settings. The teaching methodology that the course employs is student-centred, task-based learning, focusing on interactive techniques, student collaboration, group work, roleplay activities, peer activities, discussions, debates, etc. in order to develop students' advanced listening and speaking skills. Such skills are essential in professional communication in order to enhance students' confidence and boost their public speaking abilities. At the time of prevailing asynchronous written communication carried out by various chat applications, the implementation of an oral face-to-face communication course is indispensable, especially with students of linguistic majors. It also stimulates students' listening comprehension skills, which should be well-developed at the time of English as the global lingua franca, used in communicative situations involving both native and non-native speakers or non-native speakers only.

The implementation of an oral communication course is a pedagogically justified response to communicative challenges faced by learners, including Bulgarians, whose native languages generally favour an explicit mode of expression unlike the overall implicitness of the linguistic expression in English. Empirical studies in pragmatics and intercultural communication have consistently highlighted the importance of aligning linguistic form with sociocultural norms (Blum-Kulka 1987, House 2003). In many English-speaking contexts, effective communication relies mostly on empathy, implicitness, indirectness, and the avoidance of imposition. Students enrolling in the course have advanced level of English at which the interference of the mother tongue regarding vocabulary and grammar has largely been eliminated. Thus, a key challenge of the course is assisting students in overcoming the impact of their native language cultural conceptualization patterns on English usage. The communication course, therefore, enables students to acquire the pragmatic competence necessary to promote personal choice and respect for the interlocutor's autonomy and volition, which are key features of communication in English. Such training enhances linguistic sensitivity and socio-pragmatic awareness, both of which are essential for communicative interaction in academic, professional, and intercultural settings.

Results

The learning progress of the students is traced on the basis of curricular activities, continuous assessment and exam-based evaluation. Commitment to class work and the completion of various communicative tasks provides grounds for the formation of continuous assessment of students' performance. The final exam-based evaluation tests the two major components of oral communication – dialogue and monologue. The dialogue (a semi-structured interview) tests the students' abilities to interact with the interlocutor enacting various communicative situations and cases with the task to provide argumentative solutions to both academic and non-academic issues. The monologue assesses students' abilities to present structured, argumentative speech in front of a peer audience, who are expected to pose questions. The students are asked to deliver a PechaKucha presentation on a topic of their choice, subject to prior approval by the course leader, and to respond to audience questions. They are provided with the evaluation criteria for their presentations, with an emphasis on delivering a clear, persuasive and engaging monologue. The following main criteria are considered when evaluating the presentations:

- presentation structure — content slide, slides with key points and visual aids (images, videos, polls), and a references slide; presentation design, smooth slide transitions
- verbal elements — pronunciation, vocabulary choice, figurative language, inclusive language, grammatical correctness, discourse strategies, clarity, standard English
- non-verbal elements — body language, eye contact, posture, tone and pitch of the voice, intonation contour, pacing of the speaker
- delivery style and presentation skills — stage presence, confidence, charisma, pacing, timing, handling questions

• audience engagement and impact — attentiveness, responsiveness, interaction, persuasiveness, memorability

The combination of the five objective criteria listed above provides grounds for impartial assessment of the student's performance when delivering a monologue.

The selection of presentation topics merits special attention as it is indicative of the subject areas of interest to university students mostly at 20 – 21 years of age. For the six years that the course has been taught, 325 presentations have been delivered, on the basis of which the following ten major subject areas of interest to the students can be outlined as exemplified in Figure 1 below: psychology (24%), cultural studies (21%), entertainment (music, videogames, cinematography and film studies) (10%), history, geography, historical landmarks (9%), language and communication (7%), science and technology (6%), arts and fashion (5%), health and fitness (4.5%), myths and legends (3%), other (education, environment, social media, career development, literature) (10.5%).

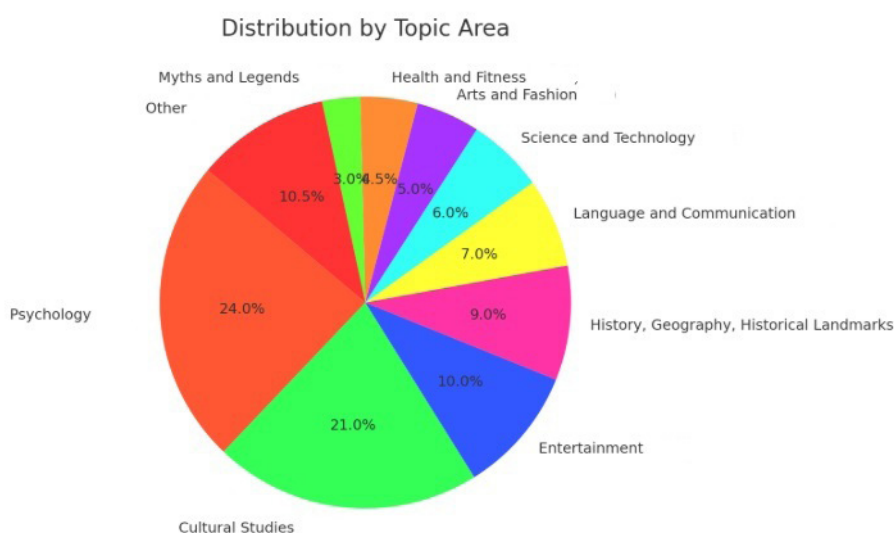


Figure 1. Distribution by topic area

The fact that the subject areas of psychology and cultural studies have been of interest to almost half of the students in the oral communication class is indicative of the interdisciplinary nature both of the course itself and of language studies majors in general.

The methodology employed in the course embraces the framework of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) (Coyle, Hood & Marsh 2010) with focus on conveying content through the means of a foreign language thus employing the major function of language as a communication tool and learning language in context. CLIL dual focus on content and foreign language learning ensures both gaining in-depth knowledge and developing oral communication skills. The subject areas of the presentations listed above focus mostly on global issues of interest to the respective peer group. Each presentation is followed by Q&A and evaluator's comments adhering to the standards of academic discourse and ensuring student-centred approach to learning. The students also come to know the issue of culture-specific sensitivity regarding their choice of presentation topics and the notion of cultural appropriation (Young 2008, Young & Brunk 2009, Borrowes & McNeil 2022), especially with reference to cultures communicating in English or in the second foreign language students master. Such an approach enhances their language fluency, critical thinking and also broadens their academic horizons, thus promoting global citizenship skills in a multilingual and interconnected world (Römhild 2023, Schultz & Blom 2023).

Discussion

In view of the structure and content of the oral communication course outlined above, the following effective strategies to enhance students' communication skills can be proposed:

- Select the proper target group and period in the curriculum when to focus mainly on developing oral communication skills. While speaking is developed together with the rest of the integrated skills, communication requires intensive training with a focused group of students who train to be leaders and public speakers in an increasingly globalized world. Rhetorical and cross-cultural communication skills are foundational to effective leadership, particularly in today's world where English functions as a global lingua franca.

- Vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation errors should be diligently corrected as far as speaking drills are concerned. Such errors have been mostly overcome prior to the level of tertiary education and are not frequent at the levels of advanced and proficiency so correcting such errors is not a major issue in an oral communication skills course. The emphasis is on gaining knowledge regarding structured speech, presentation skills and interaction with the audience by using inclusive language and non-verbal cues. Students learn how to demonstrate empathy, commitment, impartiality which are key factors for effective communication. Generally, developing emotional intelligence and adjusting one's emotive language to the context and target audience are key skills for becoming a persuasive speaker.

- Engage the students in intercultural and cross-cultural communication training so that they can learn about various cultures, values and communication styles in order to feel confident to use English as a lingua franca in international environment. Students should focus on debating, negotiating, logical reasoning, and case analysis that address largely contentious issues in the context of internationalization and globalization. Another useful strategy to employ is peer-to-peer evaluation by means of which students obtain feedback from diverse audiences. Various tasks might be developed to train students tailor their speaking styles and preferences in relation to the target audience and the particular communicative situation. The key to effective communication also involves the proper pitch of the voice, intonation contour, and tone of the message.

The strategies to enhance students' communication skills listed above can be used by educators in communication practice but also for developing speaking drills. Communicating in English with people from around the world poses challenges mainly at the level of pragmatics where differences in cultural norms, politeness strategies, and context-specific language use can lead to misunderstandings or ineffective interactions. Therefore, integrating pragmatic awareness into communication training is a prerequisite for preparing students to interact effectively in diverse global contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the development and implementation of an oral communication course for students majoring in English Studies or Applied Linguistics with English as their first foreign language has yielded significant outcomes enhancing students' oral communication and presentation skills, as well as boosting their self-confidence as effective public speakers. The time span of the course has provided the opportunity to test both synchronous online and face-to-face oral communication with marked preference for the latter. Such a course is inherently interdisciplinary demonstrating the speaker's expertise in English, body language, prosody, argumentation, persuasion, in-depth knowledge of the subject area they discuss, grasp of the audience, etc. Fostering communication skills incorporates speaking and active listening skills, interaction with the audience, as well as the ability to present information explicitly while also employing implicature and other pragmatic strategies such as hedging and mitigation to convey meaning subtly and contextually. As a whole, enhancing oral communication skills is a highly personalized learning experience tailored to individual strengths that includes self-awareness, continuous self-observation, and responsiveness to feedback within diverse communicative contexts.

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