Reflection-Based Methodology of Developing Speaking Skills

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Abstract

Nowadays being a teacher is impossible without being a reflective practitioner. This means that the system of higher education in teacher-training universities should be aimed at both achieving educational goals and developing students’ reflection. In this paper we describe a methodology that has been created to improve students’ ability to reflect that results in their speaking skills development.

Key words: Reflection, Reflective Practice, Speaking Skills, Discourse

Introduction

In the modern society a great emphasis is laid on reflective practice as the key quality of a practitioner. This article concentrates on the role of reflection for intending ESL teachers, its integration in the process of teaching English to them and the methodology of implementing this approach.

Context

The role of reflection in education was grounded in the first half of the 20th century by John Dewey (1933) who distinguished between routine and reflective actions. He argued that routine actions are unsystematic and habitual, whereas reflection “enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view [...] to act in deliberate and intentional fashion, to know what we are about when we act”.

The scientist’s ideas were developed in the early 1980s by Donald Schon (1983) who concentrated on the meaning of reflection for teaching process. Schon maintains that a teacher should be a reflective practitioner who continually learns from their experience with the help of reflection. The scientist singles out three types of it: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action, according to Schon, is about the practitioner being aware of what they are doing while they are doing it. As Farrell notices this simultaneous thinking about the action causes reshaping of what the person is doing (Farrell, 2003). Reflection-on-action is concerned with our looking back on what we have done to analyze how it could have been improved (Schon, 1983). Reflection-for-action is proactive in nature (Farrell, 2003); it guides the practitioner’s future actions basing on the results gained from the other two types of reflection.
The term “reflection” is traditionally used for questioning one’s beliefs, assumptions and values rather than one’s actions while the term “reflective practice” is focused on the doer’s activity. Barbara Larrivee (2006) states that the term “reflective practice” is the culmination of all other forms of reflection as it is “undertaken not solely to revisit the past but to guide future action” (p.6). We, however, are inclined to consider these two terms (reflection and reflective practice) interchangeable as we view reflection as the practitioner’s active inquiry into their knowledge and actions that lead to self-improvement. As Killon and Todnew (1991) maintain: “We undertake reflection not so much to revisit the past or to become more aware of the metacognitive process one is experiencing (both noble reasons in themselves) but to guide future action (the more practical purpose)” (p.15).

The significance of reflective practice for teachers is beyond denial. Due to this fact a great attention is paid by researchers to the ways of introducing and maintaining reflective practice in the classroom. At the same time other ways to intensify this process are sought. We are of the opinion that a rather logical solution to this problem might be including reflection in the course of study for intending teachers. Thus when they graduate this complicated psychological mechanism will be highly developed and will constitute one of their personal traits. As a result the graduates will have no difficulty transferring reflection onto any sphere of their personal and professional life.

**Reflection in teacher-training universities**

One of the ways of introducing reflective practice into intending teachers’ studies is integrating it into the subjects on the curriculum. In this research an attempt was made to integrate reflection into will-be teachers’ learning a second language. Yet, applying reflective practice to the whole process of learning English as a Second Language is quite an ambitious enterprise due to its (the process’) complexity and diversity. So it was decided to introduce reflective component into the process of teaching speech-production (monolog) as one of the aspects of communication learning (though it can be done in relation to any component of communicative competence). One of the reasons for choosing this aspect of teaching a second language is the fact that students have much difficulty when speaking on their own, without apparent interaction. Another reason lies in the relative independence of the speaker performing this type of activity who completely controls the talk.

The research focuses on teaching students speech production on the basis of reflective practice. Reflection plays an essential role in the speech production process, it prompts students’ analysis of their actions and encourages their self-control and self-assessment, which make up essential psychological qualities of an active and self-critical person.

**The objects of reflection**

The implementation of this methodology was made possible by first singling out the objects of reflection in the process of developing first-year students' speaking skills. These objects also serve as the criteria of assessment and self-assessment of students' utterances.
To fulfill this task and define the objects of reflection in speech production it was essential to turn to the linguistic research of discourse, its characteristics and its types. These issues form the first-year objectives in ESL teacher training universities in terms of speech production. The most common understanding of discourse is “language in use” (Fasold, 1990, Brown & Yule, 1983, van Dijk, 1980, etc.), for example Candlin (1997) views discourse as “language in use, as a process which is socially situated” (p. ix). This correlates with Deborrah Schiffrin’s (1994) understanding of discourse as ‘text used in context’. She distinguishes between the term “text” (linguistic material) and “context” (the environment in which linguistic productions occur). “In terms of utterances, then, “text” is the linguistic content […] Context is thus a world filled with people producing utterances: people who have social, cultural, and personal identities, knowledge, beliefs, goals and wants, and who interact with one another in various socially and culturally defined situations” (p. 363).

This understanding of discourse made it possible for us to single out the criteria for speech production assessment based on discourse characteristics. Following Tischer et al. (2000) we distinguish text-internal and text-external criteria of discourse. To text-internal criteria belong:

- Cohesion, which is formal connectedness of a text. A great significance for teaching cohesive speech belongs to discourse markers, which Andersen (2001) understands as “a class of short, recurrent linguistic items that generally have little lexical import but serve significant pragmatic functions in conversation,” (p. 39). In this research a great importance is attached to the fact that different discourse markers are used in descriptive, narrative and argumentative discourse accordingly.
- Coherence, which is understood as the wholeness of a text that conveys its meaning.
- Completeness of an utterance is understood as its finality, which is seen by the speaker. It is measured by the abundance of the expression of the speaker’s thought.
- Type of speech. There are three main types of speech: description, narration and argumentation. This classification is based upon the objective relations between the phenomena in real life: a person perceives objective forms of matter existence in time (narration), space (description) and the cause-effect relations between notions (argumentation).

To text-external factors we refer the following:

- Addressee account, which implies direct influence of the addressee on the speaker’s selection of lexical and grammar structures and their speech strategy. As Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) pointed out any utterance including a monolog is built upon dialogic relationships.
- Situationality, which means that the situation in which the discourse is produced, plays a crucial role in the production and perception of the message. In our research a great emphasis is laid on the situation as social relationship between the interlocutors, their intentions, status and personal characteristics. All these factors influence the lexical and grammatical constructions the speaker uses and the style of the discourse.
- Intentionality, which relates to the aim of the speaker and, most importantly, its realization in the discourse.

The study of the text-internal and text-external discourse characteristics distinguished above allowed us to single out the objects of reflection. These objects guide the process of learning to produce monologs. In the table below there is an illustration of the objects of reflection for argumentation. In the left column there are objects, which are common for all the speech types; in the right column, the objects typical of
argumentation are presented. There we included the most important characteristic of this speech type.

### Table 1: Objects of reflection on argumentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common objects</th>
<th>Specific objects of argumentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td>Right wording of the thesis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>Logical structure (thesis-arguments-conclusion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completeness</td>
<td>The arguments are sufficient and adequate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of speech</td>
<td>The connectors are adequate for argumentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressee account</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situationality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionality</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Reflection-based methodology of developing speaking skills**

The selected objects of reflection enabled us to develop the reflection-based methodology of developing speaking skills. The proposed methodology is based on Galperin’s Theory of Stage-by-Stage Formation of Mental Activity (Galperin, 1969), which in its turn is grounded on the ideas of Vygotsky’s scientific school. The methodology is aimed at the development of students’ speaking skills on the basis of reflection. This aim is achieved through the implementation of the system of exercises of the stage-by-stage development of reflection and speech production skills.

As it was mentioned above the methodology is built upon Galperin’s Theory of Stage-by-Stage Formation of Mental Activity, which states that human mental activity is formed out of the transformation of external (“materialized”) activity. Pyotr Y. Galperin proved that mental activity reflects materialized one and that the former includes all the components of the latter with the difference that external activity operates material objects whereas mental activity deals with ideal ones. The scientist distinguished five stages of the interiorization of an external action, which are analyzed in relation to teaching argumentation (as one of the three main speech types) to students below.

**1) The informational and motivational stage**

According to Galperin the aim of this stage is to form the orienting basis of an action (OBA), which is understood as the set of orienting elements by which the student is guided towards successful execution of an action (Ramirez, 2012). During teaching speech-production on the basis of reflection the teacher motivates the students to study and provides them with theoretical information on discourse (its characteristics, types of speech and their qualities) and reflection (its significance in the educational process). Reflection is integrated into speech-production starting from the very first stage of this methodology.

The first task to the students was to reflect on their existing level of speech and juxtapose it with the requirements to it being logical, cohesive, coherent and linguistically adequate. Besides, reflection-for-action helped the students predict the
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possible applications of the gained knowledge and their probable difficulties. At the beginning of the academic year the teacher checked the students’ level of speaking skills by recording their talks on a number of topics. After the students gained the information on the theory of discourse and reflection, they listened to their recorded talks and analyzed them from the perspective of the acquired knowledge with the help of the following tasks.

Reflection-on-action. Listen to your utterance and answer the questions:

a) What discourse criteria were observed? What did I do to observe them while speaking?
b) What discourse criteria weren’t observed in my speech? What can I do to observe them next time? How will my speech change if I do it?

Reflection-for-action.

a) Going by my answers in the previous exercise what should I do to apply my knowledge of discourse criteria to speech?
b) Which criteria will I pay particular attention to while speaking next?

The goals of the 1st stage were achieved through the set of preparatory exercises whose main function was to form the cognitive basis for further activity: 1) exercises that form knowledge of ‘discourse’; 2) exercises that ensure analysis and recognition of the text-internal and text-external characteristics; 3) exercises that prompt students’ singling out the specific qualities of argumentation; 4) exercises that provide the analysis of the model discourse. The examples of exercises are shown below:

1. Exercises on the analysis of the text-external characteristics of discourse:

   Find the sentence that doesn’t take the addressee into account (Key: e):

   a) Now, if you listen to me…
b) I believe, this is a picture of…
c) It’s quite popular in the UK to go on a picnic.
d) We have to consider this fact.
e) The rose is a flower that has sharp prickles on the stem.
f) You should be careful when touching roses: they have sharp prickles.

   Match the phrases from the left column with their possible addresses:

   a) Darling, let’s go to that restaurant in town. 1. A secretary talking to her boss.
b) If you think it’s appropriate, we can invite our partners to that restaurant in town.
c) Hey! Fancy going to that new place to have a bite? 3. A wife talking to her husband.
d) Sweetie, let’s go to a café. I promise to buy you an ice cream! 4. A friend asking their friend to join them.
e) I was wondering if you’d like to go out to have dinner with me? 5. A mother asking her child to go to a café.

   (Key: a-3, b-1, c-4, d-5, e-2)

   Analyze the discourse sample and say what the speaker’s communicative intention was? Does the utterance correspond to it?

2. Exercises on analyzing the model discourse:

   Analyze the utterance and answer the questions:

   1) What speech type does it refer to?
   2) Is the addressee taken into account? Prove you point.
3) What are the social relationships between the interlocutors? How do you understand it?
4) What is the speaker’s communicative intention? Does the speech type correspond to it?
5) Underline the discourse markers. Are they adequate to the purpose and style of the utterance?
6) How many subtopics are there in the discourse? Do they contribute to its coherence?
7) Comment on the logical structure of the discourse.
8) Is the utterance complete? Is its duration adequate to the speaker’s communicative intention?

2) The orienting stage

Galperin maintained that the second stage of the formation of mental activity is all about material activity, in which learners manipulate real objects: models, schemes, diagrams and drawings. In this methodology the second stage was aimed at creating the scheme of the orienting basis of the action, which may have the view of a table for the students to fill in (see the scheme below). The objects of reflection included the discourse criteria that are important for argumentation and at the same time are criteria for assessment of students’ speaking skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Argumentation Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The logical structure of argumentation</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At this stage students’ knowledge of discourse features was improved, the argumentation model (the material support) was created and the lexical and grammatical skills adequate for argumentation were formed.

The students were engaged in reflection during their analysis and comprehension of the theory on argumentative discourse and their control of its practical application to speech-production. Reflection-in-action corresponded with students’ self-control and self-regulation while speaking, whereas reflection-on-action was carried out in a loud form during the students’ retrospective analysis of their group-mates’ talks and later during the students’ self-analysis of their own utterances. In the table there are the questions that encouraged the students to reflect on their speech:

**Table 2: Questions for developing reflection-on-action**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions for retrospective analysis of your group mates’ talks (group work)</th>
<th>Questions for reflection on your talk (individually)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What was the speaker’s aim in the utterance?</td>
<td>What was my aim in the utterance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did s/he do to achieve it?</td>
<td>What did I do to achieve it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do you think about the result?</td>
<td>What do I think about the result?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think so?</td>
<td>Why do I think so?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the speaker’s interlocutor’s idea of the utterance?</td>
<td>What is my interlocutor’s idea of the utterance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why do you think so?</td>
<td>Why do I think so?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Questions for reflection-for-action:
  a) Which criteria will I pay particular attention to while speaking next?
  b) How will I apply these criteria to my speech?

The goals of the 2nd stage were realized with the help of training exercises: 1) exercises that train the features of argumentation; 2) exercises that train students in using adequate connectors; 3) exercises on retelling the model discourse:

1. Exercises that train the features of argumentation:
   - Enumerate all possible arguments for the thesis: Teaching children is not easy.
   - Think of the logical and appropriate arguments and conclusion to the thesis: Driving a car in a city is a waste of time and money.

2. Exercises on adequate connectors:
   Choose the most adequate discourse markers in the following argumentation.
   Keep in mind its situation: an Englishman is explaining to a friend the reason why some Irish people aren’t happy with being part of the UK (Svartvik, 1980):

Certainly/As a matter of fact/Clearly, history and religion are very emotional things in Ireland. There’s no doubt it. But/ However/ Nevertheless I don’t think they are overriding things. I think/ It is my firm opinion/ I am convinced that a lot of the present trouble has its roots in the period just before the First World War when there was err Redmond campaigning for Home Rule. And/ In addition/ So let’s face it, the situation in Ireland then wasn’t terribly different err in respect to the situation with Scotland and Wales today. There are these faint rumbling noises, call it what you like … call it nationalism, call it decentralization, reorganization of local government … something along those lines, but people on the spot feel that their interests aren’t being priority by the people in Westminster. And they therefore/ as a result of it all/ really start off by asking for a slightly different set-up. They’re not going the whole hog and saying: ‘Right, we’re going to be a republic’. They are merely saying: ‘Can we have some kind of an assembly in which we decide our own affairs as it affects us on a kind of parochial basis? And you chaps go on with the international policy.’ And / Actually/ Basically that example was all Redmond was asking for in 1912 and I think it’s a tragedy he didn’t pull it off (p. 576-577).

3) The training stage

According to Galperin the third stage of mental formation is aimed at verbalization when students repeat the operations aloud without the material support. The aim of the third stage of the current methodology is to continue developing speaking skills without the material support (the argumentation model).

At this stage reflection-for-action helped students anticipate possible difficulties; reflection-in-action helped them realize all the requirements during speech production process. Reflection-on-action was verbalized in a loud form and carried out individually after the task on speaking.

Questions for reflection-on-action:
  a) What was my aim in the utterance?
  b) What did I do to achieve it?
  c) What do I think about the result?
d) Why do I think so?
e) What is my interlocutor’s idea of the utterance?
f) Why do I think so?
g) What did I do not as well as I could have done? Do I always/regularly make this mistake?

Questions for reflection-for-action:
   a) Which criteria will I pay particular attention to while speaking next?
   b) How will I apply these criteria to my speech?
   c) What am I going to do to avoid making this mistake again?

This stage included: 1) preparatory exercises: a brief analysis of model discourse, 2) exercises training the adequate use of connectors, 3) exercises on retelling the model discourse with modifications.

4) The training-creative stage

In Galperin’s theory the fourth stage plays an important role as it provides gradual movement of the action from the outside to the inside: the action at this stage is carried out at the inner level but it still can be verbalized if needed. This stage of the current methodology was aimed at speech production with the subsequent inward reflection.

All the kinds of reflection (reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action) were essential at this stage and were carried out inwardly. The students were conscious of each operation and were able to expand the process of reflection when required (when they made a mistake, the teacher asked to comment on the necessary feature of discourse).

Below are sample questions on reflection-on-action that the teacher could ask if a student didn’t observe some discourse characteristics:
• What element of the logical structure of argumentation did you realize in this extract? (If a student made a mistake in logical structure)
• Could you have expressed this thought in another way/ a little better/ more accurate/ more logical? (If a student doesn’t observe the rules of cohesion and coherence)
• Comment why you said it this way/ used this vocabulary/ grammar? (If there are lexical/grammatical mistakes in the speech)

This stage consisted of: 1) exercises on retelling of the model discourse with modifications, 2) speech-productive exercises (in the frames of one speech type, i.e. argumentation).

5) The creative stage

The fifth stage of Galperin’s theory is characterized by fulfilling the activity at the wholly inner level. In this methodology it was aimed at the development of speech-production skills of mixed speech types with reflection carried out at the inner level.

At the final stage reflection consisted of the students’ informed assessment of their level of argumentation skills and realizing the ways of their further development. The goals of this stage were realized through speech-productive exercises that were directed at production of natural monologs of one and more speech types: argumentation + description/narration.
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The conducted research

The described methodology was put to the test at the first year of Moscow City Teachers Training University. During one year at the classes of English Speech Practice the students were taught to apply reflection to their speech. The process consisted of three modules: Module One concentrated on teaching description, Module Two on teaching narration and Module Three on teaching argumentation. The students had three tests to take: one at the beginning of the academic year, before the methodology was applied, another one was the mid-course test and the last test was held at the end of the first year. These tests examined the students’ progress in speaking skills and ability to reflect on them. The research was carried out with the help of quantitative and qualitative methods; the key method was case study.

The research had two goals: the first one was to determine if the reflection-based methodology of developing speaking skills promotes the development of reflection. The second goal consisted of testing the methodology’s efficiency in developing speaking skills.

1st goal – determine if the reflection-based methodology of developing speaking skills promotes the development of reflection

The first test demonstrated that the students didn’t understand the role of reflection in speech production; they had no notion of the objects of reflection and thus didn’t know how to apply reflective practice while speaking. The results of the third test revealed that by the end of the first year the majority of students made good progress and learned to apply reflection to speech production. Case study allowed us to conclude that applying the objects of reflection to speaking played the key role in promoting reflective practice. The students admitted that they used to “have a lot of difficulty thinking over their speech as they didn’t know what to start with and how to get rid of their mistakes”. It led to their frustration, confusion and unwillingness to continue working on speaking skills. The students’ answers proved that the methodology helped them understand the role of reflection in developing speaking skills and encouraged them to reflect while speaking (reflection-in-action), after speaking (reflection-on-action) and before speaking (reflection-for-action). As one of the students admitted, reflection helped her control the process of speaking. She used to think about what she was going to say only before speaking and didn’t think about it afterwards, as she got nervous when she realized how many mistakes she had made. She said that she had learnt to control her grammar and speech in general while speaking.

2nd goal – test the efficiency of the methodology to develop speaking skills

We analyzed the index of speaking skills development by the end of the first year according to the criteria that are based on discourse characteristics described above. These criteria and the index of growth are presented in the table below.
Table 3: The index of growth of speaking skills criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The criteria</th>
<th>Index of growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressee account and situationality</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intentionality</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coherence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completeness</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy (vocabulary and grammar)</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy (phonetics)</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Going by the data in the table it is obvious that by the end of the first year the speech of most students met the criteria of intentionality, coherence and completeness. This result is predetermined by the cognitive basis for speaking that plays the major role in observing these criteria. However, the criteria of accuracy, cohesion and fluency, which were not always observed, require not only the cognitive basis but also extensive speech practice. The conducted case study allowed us to conclude that the students’ speaking skills significantly improved due to the application of the methodology: the students stopped making unnecessary pauses (while looking for a suitable word/construction); they started using varied discourse markers and followed the logical structure that contributed to the cohesion, coherence and intentionality of their speech.

All in all we can affirm that as a result of this methodology speech production skills were efficiently improved and concurrently the students' ability to reflect on their speech was developed.

Conclusion

Integrating reflective practice into the course of study for intending teachers has made the learning process more efficient because it facilitated and developed students’ reflection and enabled them to make informed decisions concerning their learning strategies and acquired skills.
References


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