



TEASIG NEWSLETTER

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From speaking micro skills to general communicative skills development: a practical approach

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Introduction

The issue of assessment in education has always been a thorny one. What to test? How to test it? And how to evaluate the answers given? These are the questions that should be answered by a teacher before any written work or oral presentation tasks are assigned to students.

It is often argued that the only skills which are effectively trained and finally developed are those that are assessed and evaluated later in a course. Students tend to pay more attention and become more involved in practising particular skills if they know that what they do is closely connected to an exam. Thus, it is important to impart fundamental speaking skills as they are crucial for the honing of general communicative skills.

Macro and micro skills in speaking

There are at least three groups of skills that provide the framework for the whole process of developing and assessing students' speaking ability. These are the global, macro and micro skills of speaking, the last of which is basic to the others.

The terms "macro and micro skills", introduced by D. Brown, correlate with the "can do" statements used in the CEFR to describe what learners can do at various levels of skill in Speaking, Writing, Listening and Reading.

During PhD research conducted at Lomonosov Moscow State University, speaking micro and macro skills were determined on the basis of the CEFR: B2-C1 language proficiency levels, as they are thought to be the levels of fluency necessary for students' academic mobility throughout the world.

It is worth mentioning that the invariant kernel of the speaking skills assessed at B2-C1 levels includes:

- a number of lexical and grammatical patterns which suffice for discussion purposes
- an ability to produce logical utterances on general topics with regard to the cultural and linguistic standards of the country
- an ability to initiate and to keep a conversation going while speaking at a normal pace without clearly pronounced pauses.

Based on these criteria, a number of global, macro and micro skills were singled out. There are 5 global, approximately 22 macro and many more micro skills. The research showed that some speaking micro skills form an integral part of more than two macro skills. Consequently, 10 backbone micro skills in speaking underlying the majority of macro skills were determined. They are as follows (given in the descending order):

- ability to report back to what was said to confirm or reject
- ability to provide relevant explanation
- ability to speculate about causes and consequences
- ability to express ideas
- ability to handle interjections
- ability to answer questions
- ability to use appropriate register
- ability to provide personal opinion
- ability to weigh advantages and disadvantages
- ability to summarise given information

One of the micro skills singled out is "an ability to handle interjections". It is a productive skill which is crucial for general communicative skills as it involves the use of set expressions, stock phrases and various language clichés. Not only does this skill allow a speaker to keep a conversation going and/or give the impression of active participation in it, but it also helps keep the exchanges in turn and gain time while formulating what to say.

Moreover, the significance of this micro skill increases when combined with another micro skill, "an ability to respond spontaneous-

ly and almost effortlessly". This constitutes the basis for a few speaking macro skills on the levels of reception and interaction. In this context it implies a very important macro skill: "an ability to handle heckling or audience questions", such as might arise during a presentation. Unfortunately, however vital this skill may seem in an academic and professional environment, it is rarely developed and honed consistently in the modern educational system.

Developing micro skills

How can it be trained? What could we do to teach our students to deal with extraordinary situations when giving a speech?

First of all, it should be said that the micro skills mentioned above can be worked out independently or simultaneously in different situations. If they are trained freely students will practice how to use interjections and exclamations in a natural way without them seeming to have been "learnt by heart". Alternatively, being polished together as a macro skill, these skills will enable students to maintain contact with the audience during a presentation while handling interruptions and interjections without getting side-tracked and losing their train of thought.

The following situations may help to develop these micro skills independently:

Monologue

A monologue: students are asked to present/read in front of the class a prepared, written text, delivered as if they were extemporizing. For this they should use exclamations, interjections and pauses.

Communicative micro situations

Communicative micro situations: students should come up with a short dialogue on a particular topic, on which they will have to both ask and answer questions and make and respond to each other's remarks in a natural way. This task helps them to practice the use of interjections and discourse markers in communication.

An example of such a task is a game opposite to the "Yes and No" game. Students

should ask each other direct questions on various topics, the range of which is limited only by their language proficiency level. However, students are not allowed to answer "yes" or "no", but are encouraged to use discourse markers. The pace of the exercise should be reasonably fast.

For example:

1.
 - You live in Edinburgh, don't you?
 - Of course I do.
2.
 - Yesterday I read a book about elves.
 - Oh, was it nice?
 - Well, it was quite interesting.

The following Yes/No statement may be used by a teacher to assess students' progress:

- *a learner can use interjections and discourse markers appropriately*

Developing macro skills

Having honed the micro skills independently, it is worth proceeding to integrate them in the related macro skill: "an ability to handle heckling and/or audience questions".

Role-play

This macro skill is easily practised in a role-play between students. Student A should give a particular piece of information to Student B, whose task is to ask as many unrelated questions as possible to try side-track Student A. The questions should not be random, but be logically connected. To do this Student B will have to use linking words and discourse markers. Student A should try to react naturally without losing his/her train of thought. S/he cannot ignore Student B's questions. Moreover, Student A should still fulfil the main task, which is to inform Student B of something. The general tone of the role-play has to be neutral and polite. Students should be given a list of possible introductory phrases, useful collocations and stock phrases, and a range of discourse functions which will help them to preface their remarks appropriately etc.

The following Yes/No statements might be used for evaluation.

Student A:

- has fulfilled the task and informed Student B
- reacted to 1-3 unrelated questions without diverting from the issue at hand
- used appropriate discourse markers and stock phrases

Student B:

- has fulfilled the task and managed to change the subject
- asked 1-3 unrelated questions helping the discussion along
- used appropriate introductory remarks and discourse functions

- reacted to 1-3 related questions without diverting from the issue at hand
- used appropriate discourse markers and stock phrases

Audience:

- has fulfilled the task and managed to change the subject
- asked 1-3 unrelated questions related to the topic of discussion
- used appropriate introductory remarks and discourse functions

Prompts

Depending on the students' language proficiency various prompts might be used for these tasks.




Monologue

This important macro skill might also be honed through a monologue. A student is asked to give a speech in front of the class (depending on the proficiency level the speech can be prepared in advance or delivered after 3-5 minutes' preparation). The student's peers should try to interrupt his/her train of thought by asking questions related to the topic, or simply by heckling. Different ways of distracting might be used to divert the speaker's attention: verbal, non-verbal or by pure communicative strategy. The speaker's task is to respond adequately to the remarks/questions without losing his/her train of thought or the logic of the speech, and be able to get back to the point.

Evaluation criteria for this task are similar to those in role-playing.

The simplest one both for a teacher and students includes what- and how-questions on familiar topics, i.e. 'What do you usually do in the morning?', 'Describe your typical day out', 'How is Christmas celebrated in your country?'

The next one requires some preparation from a teacher; however, being visual, it attracts students' attention and keeps them focused on the task. The following pictures and tasks might be used (Table 1):

Picture 1	Picture 2	Picture 3
		
Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
Describe a picture to your partner. What holidays are shown there? How do you know?	Describe a picture to your partner. What toy/game is shown there? What are the rules?	Describe a picture to your partner. What kind of balls are shown there? What sport is associated with them?

Speaker:

- has fulfilled the task and informed the audience

The purpose of the lesson defines the choice of prompts. The two tasks above aim at a descriptive monologue and do not imply critical thinking. To give student's an opportunity to share their views on an issue or a problem, quotations of famous people or proverbs might be used instead of images. It's better to give students a set of quotes or proverbs so that they can choose which one they'd like to discuss. For example:

Quotes:

- 1. The heart knows its own bitterness, and a stranger does not share its joy. (Prov 14:10)
- 2. If you don't build your dream, someone else will hire you to help them build theirs. (Dhirubhai Ambani)
- 3. If you're going through hell, keep going. (Winston Churchill)

Proverbs:

- 1. Birds of a feather flock together
- 2. Scratch my back and I'll scratch yours
- 3. Beauty is only skin deep

Speaking is a creative task, especially at higher language proficiency levels. However, students should be given some frames to keep to. For these word-lists or word-clouds might be employed both to inspire students to talk on a particular topic and to assess their knowledge of vocabulary in use.

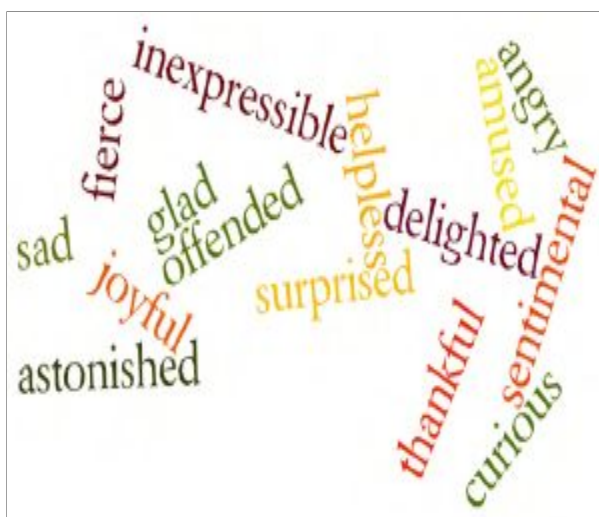
Task 4: Come up with a story using as many words from a word-cloud as possible



Task 5: Make a weather forecast using as many words from the word-cloud as possible.



Task 6: Tell your partner about the last movie/book you've seen/read using as many words from the word-cloud as possible



Summing up

Micro and macro skills are easily developed or honed within a few themes pursuing an integrated approach to teaching. It is worth devoting a few lessons to practising them, followed by subsequent diagnostic checks on other topics for a delayed assessment of these micro and macro skills.

In the view of the above it is clear that the micro and macro skills under consideration

are connected directly to students' scientific and future professional careers, so their development ought to become an integral part of modern education.



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