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## **Pair work and group work with texts in the development of ESP communication skills**

*Jana Šavelová*

### **Abstract**

This paper is focused on the role of pair work and group work in developing speaking skills. International communication requires people who understand and respond to the impulses of a fast-developing world and therefore it is pair work and group work that are understood as a successful language training activity for professionals.

**Key words:** *pair work and group work, teaching foreign language for specific purposes, learning process, elimination of problems*

### **1. Introduction**

The best way to get people closer together is communication, and foreign languages help us to link various cultures. The best way how to improve communication skills is to choose the most appropriate organizational form of teaching. The task of the teacher will be to bring communication in a foreign language to the optimum possible number of students. Working in groups can best provide for such activities. Its great advantage is that it will easily ensure the transfer from presentation to production, and the more importantly, the role of organizational process is assumed by the students themselves. This paper deals with the group form of teaching and development of communication for ESP. The term "English for specific purposes" commonly refers to teaching a specific genre of English to learners with special needs and goals, and is contrasted with general English. The group form of teaching is understood as work within a group and work in a pair, because the pair represents the smallest organizational unit. Despite the fact that our times channel people into competitiveness and individualism, coexistence and cooperation are important for life too.

The ESP characteristics point out the fact that its primary goal is to meet the needs of learners with specific reasons for learning English. According to Hutchinson – Waters, this is the only difference between ESP and GE. Dudley-Evans and St. John's definition of ESP admits some more distinctions between ESP and GE, such as that ESP is related to older learners with a certain level of English, or that it requires a different methodology.

### **2. ESP texts in the process of teaching and learning**

Taking into consideration all the above-mentioned characteristics of ESP and the purpose of ESP courses which relate to learners' needs, we will first point out the distinguishing characteristics between ESP texts and GE texts; and secondly, outline general principles of working with ESP texts. One of the important characteristics of ESP texts is their authenticity. The selection of a text requires special attention. The meaning of the texts in ESP is more important than the language, which is only used to derive a message from the texts (Nuttall, 2000). In other words, the purpose of ESP texts is to convey messages and not to teach language, which means that the learners' primary focus is on the content of the chosen articles. Therefore, the text should be appropriate,

## Development of ESP

relevant to students' knowledge and related to their special needs and interests. Once good texts have been selected, then activities can be prepared. These should be related to the overall purpose of reading the text and understanding it.

### 2.1. Text exploitation

Text exploitation in ESP traditionally consists of three parts: pre-reading activities, reading of the text and post-reading activities. Each stage serves different purposes, but their common final goal is to facilitate learners' understanding of the overall message of the text; to activate and deepen their knowledge while thinking about this; and to raise their interest in subsequent working with texts. The follow-up activities, as the final stage of the ESP teaching and learning process are supported with the work in pairs or groups, and thus learners will have a chance to apply the knowledge they have gained from working with the text.

#### 2.1.1. Pre-reading activities

In real life, people generally know what they are going to read about and why. They read to find something out, check some information or simply read for pleasure. These principles should also be applied when working with ESP texts in order to awaken the learners' interest in reading them, and hence a good introduction is essential. Nuttall (2000) emphasises that a good introduction should be short, give an appropriate amount of information about the text and should also involve the students. The introduction in the form of a discussion and asking of questions is appropriate. Moise (1996) suggests giving students the title of the text and asking them to predict what the text is likely to be about. She considers brainstorming as a good way of activating their background knowledge. Furthermore, it is also possible to use such non-linear elements (that can be used for forming a hypothesis about the texts) as illustrations, charts, diagrams, maps, or graphs. Exploiting this non-linear information makes reading easier and helps learners in a better understanding of the text (Nuttall, 152)

#### 2.1.2. Reading of the text

When working with ESP texts, silent reading is preferred. This technique encourages learners' independence, increases their concentration on the text and its meaning and also takes into account their own individual pace of reading.

*Skimming and Scanning* are valuable techniques that enable students to select texts or parts of texts:

- **scanning** implies glancing rapidly through a text for specific information. The purpose is to extract a piece of information without reading the whole text, which is essential for ESP studies;
- **skimming** consists of quickly running one's eye through a whole text for its gist and main ideas, in order to decide whether the text is relevant and applicable to one's requirements or to predict the purpose of a passage, the main topic, or a message (Brown, 2001).

To practise scanning, teachers can ask students, for example, to find a date, a name or a number, in order to practise skimming, teachers can supply a text and several titles and ask 'Which title fits the text best?'; a text and a list of topics with the question 'Which topics are dealt with in this

text; a text and several figures with the task to identify which figure(s) illustrate the text; or give students several “global” questions to answer. Scanning and skimming strategies are also good in the sense that they can start students working with texts on a positive note, instead of starting a lesson with negative elements such as unfamiliar vocabulary.

#### *Linguistic preparation*

Most students are afraid of reading ESP texts because they are afraid of many unknown words and they think they will not understand the article. Thus, when working with ESP texts it is important to teach students that words are not all equally important and that there are words that can be skipped without losing the sense. Nuttall (2000) distinguishes three types of vocabulary:

- (1) *active* – words you know well enough to use yourself
- (2) *receptive* – words you recognize and can respond to, but cannot confidently use
- (3) *throwaway* – words not worth learning, even at the receptive level (2000, p. 64)

This means, in practice, that it is not worth teaching each unknown word which appears in the text and that students should also realise that they are able to get the gist without understanding every single word. Therefore the majority of ESP methodologies advise us to pre-teach only a few key words and suggest other ways for presenting new vocabulary:

- to ask students to look up key words in a dictionary;
- to teach students to analyse a word with respect to stem, prefix, and suffix.
- to guess a word’s meaning from the context, using structural clues to determine the type or grammatical category of the unknown word.

Whichever technique he/she chooses when dealing with new vocabulary, the teacher’s primary goal should always be to improve the learners’ ability to select the appropriate meaning for a word in its context.

#### **2.1.3. Post-reading activities**

After the first reading, students are asked to answer the guiding questions. Then the teacher assigns comprehension questions and the students proceed to the detailed reading of the text. When working with ESP texts, the teacher should encourage his or her students to use various strategies such as highlighting the relevant information, using different colours or types of underlining (e.g. for facts or numbers), or making marginal notes. These are very useful techniques in preparing students for their future studies of ESP texts as well. Once the second reading is finished, the teacher checks the comprehension questions, ensuring that all the learners understand the message of the text as it was intended by its author. When the learners have handled this task, follow-up activities can be assigned.

#### **2.1.4. Follow-up activities**

The goal of ESP follow-up activities is to provide learners with a chance to apply or transfer the knowledge they have gained from working with the text. These activities should also encourage learners’ independence and stimulate their creativity. Among the most widely-appreciated follow-up activities belong:

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- role play, interview, acting out a dialogue
- writing a summary or report
- preparing a piece of research

In general, these activities can be divided into oral, written and a combination of the two. As the subject of this article is to deal with oral activities, based on reading specialized texts, we will now consider ESP and communication activities from the point of view of work in pairs and group work.

### 3. Work in pairs in developing communication skills

The smallest unit for work is a pair. Working in pairs typically involves the exchange of information between partners. According to Doff (1992), this type of work can be called simultaneous work in pairs. It is possible to work with a system of open work in pairs – pairs present the results of their work in front of the whole group. Doff (1992) uses such terms as “simultaneous pairwork”, “public pairwork” and “open pairwork”. On the other hand, Gower, Philips, Walters (1995) refer to “open pairwork” and “closed pairwork”. They are concerned with only one, or all the pairs, communicate at the same time. Byrne (1990) uses the terms “fixed pairs” and “flexible pairs”. However, the work in flexible pairs requires movement in class, and instructions from the teacher, because students are not always willing to change partners. Apart from the fact that work in groups and in pairs prepares students for team work, it also has several other advantages. Many authors deal with advantage classification, among others Byrne (1990), Cross (1991), Doff (1992), Gower, Philips and Walters (1995), Haines (1995). Haines (1995) states six advantages: 1) work in pairs allows independent interaction in class, it allows the exchange of opinions, the comparison of personal experience, problem solutions; 2) work in pairs guarantees maximum participation and increases the length of oral presentation for students; 3) work in pairs motivates students to be independent of the teacher; 4) work in pairs allow students to work at their own pace; 5) the principle “two heads are better than one” can be applied, students exchange information, e.g. how to apply grammatical rules; 6) work in pairs stimulates cooperation and not rivalry.

### 4. Work in groups in developing communication skills

Similarly to work in pairs, students working in groups also fulfil different simultaneous tasks. The division of students into groups allows the interaction of students for which reason it is extremely important to determine a coordinator for each group; either the students can do so, or the teacher. A group of students between 3 and 6 in number is considered to be the best, because as Renner (1993) mentions, students tend to form sub-groups if the group is too big. Gower, Philips and Walters (1995) state the following advantages for work in groups: 1) it strengthens good relations among students; 2) it offers the possibility of mutual cooperation and less dependence on the teacher; 3) students are more involved in the teaching process; 4) it allows shy students to be more active; 5) it allows students to follow their own pace; 6) the lesson is more varied. However, there are also disadvantages, and the teacher should be aware of them. More difficult control of the process, mistakes and errors can be repeated by other members of the group, noise, tendency to use the mother language, better students do work for the weaker students and thus the weaker students are unmotivated, etc.



### 5. Elimination of some problems regarding work in pairs and groups

All problems that may occur during work with students in pairs or groups can be eliminated. The most typical problem is the use of the mother tongue. The students tend to use their mother tongue for several reasons, three of which are dominant: either the students lack language competence, or the topic is so uninteresting that they are not personally involved in it, or the topic is very interesting and the students are emotionally involved too much. First of all, the teacher should be sure that the students have sufficient language competence for their tasks. If an assignment is too demanding, they will not be motivated and they will try to avoid completing the assignment. If this is the case then the teacher should have some aids ready, with useful terms and grammar structures, that students can use during their work. If the students are emotionally involved in the assignment, it may happen that they prefer to use the mother tongue in order to explain everything in more detail. At the moment, the topic is more important than learning language skills. The teacher can easily eliminate this by joining the group for a while. Gower, Phillips and Walters (1995) suggest several solutions to this difficulty during the work in groups. Specifically, they attribute importance to the following factors: the place of the teacher in the classroom, i.e. the closer to the group, the better; clear justification by the teacher of the importance of using the foreign language so as to get support from the students; use by the teacher of a scenario, whereby the pair or group present their solution to others; clear instructions suitably brief in duration of the communication activities; monitoring of the work of pairs and groups by the teacher (with paper and pencil in hand), whereby ethical principles must be strictly observed.

According to Cullen (2002), what is a very effective is a supportive teacher talk. Its function and task is an "F-move". An "F-move" relates to Follow-up or Feedback and it is applicable within the framework of the chain I-R-F, i.e. Initiate-Respond-Follow-up. If the teacher uses the scheme I-R-F during teaching oral communication skills, the teacher is supporting the learning process by creating pleasant working surroundings, rich in the foreign language and motivating the students adequately. It supports the development of dialogue among the students as well as meaningful dialogue between the teacher and the class. The role of the teacher is indispensable and his/her interference in the learning process necessary. First of all, the teacher should consider the selection of activities according to the needs of the students and their language competence. After the choice of activities, the process of working out the instructions follows. The instructions must be clear, short, and if necessary presented in the mother tongue. After giving instructions, the teacher monitors the class. Corrections of mistakes and errors is not recommended during this phase. With respect to ESP, the teacher- the monitor- should also pay attention to whether the students are using relevant lexis. The lexis of ESP comprises passive (receptive) and active (productive) lexis. Choděra (2006) points out that every word of the active vocabulary is at the same time a word of the passive vocabulary, but this fact is not applicable vice versa. There are also differences between them in practice. Therefore the words determined for production must be activated. With regard to the abovementioned, the teacher should pay special attention as to whether only this type of ESP lexis is activated. The active and passive vocabulary should be also taken into account while teaching metaphors for the purpose of ESP teaching. The issue whether to teach or not to teach metaphors for specific purposes is considered in more detail by Rošková (2002).

### 6. Conclusion

The restructuring of a class into pairs or groups represents a desirable form of teaching ESP on condition it is complemented with the relevant lexis. It increases the share of a student's participation in work, it provides a more relaxed atmosphere, it teaches students to cooperate and,

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in particular, it offers the students an opportunity to communicate in foreign language with the lexis they need for their future professions. If we presuppose that the interaction of a student with another student is involved in the student's development and in his/her satisfaction with his/her studies, it seems to be necessary that the teacher should give up his role of authority and leave the students some space for learning from one another.

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