

## RELEVANT TOPICS MOTIVATING LEARNERS OF ENGLISH TO PRODUCE MEANINGFUL UTTERANCES

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**Abstract:** This paper explores conversational topics suggested for arousing students' interest in classroom discussions as a means of developing their speech skills. The purpose of this research is to compare teachers and students' expectations concerning the most welcome topics for communication tasks, the topics motivating students to produce meaningful utterances in response to communicative tasks set by teachers. Lack of linguistic means is usually seen as the main barrier, preventing students from verbalizing their ideas in the target language. However, for different reasons, it is the unwelcome topic which becomes the real obstacle, interfering with teachers' efforts to get their students speaking. Very few topics are equally favoured both by teachers and students. The article analyzes reasons for the negative response of students to certain topics marked by teachers as preferable for classroom discussions. To conclude, we identify the types of topics that preferred by students of foreign languages and emphasize the importance of studying the personality of students in terms of reliance on their social experience when developing speech skills in the target language.

**Key words:** conversational topic, target language, personal problem, cultural issue, social experience

### 1 Introduction

The task of motivating students to produce meaningful utterances in the target language has been the focus of academic research (Varlamova et al, 2016; Mukhametzyanova & Shayakhmetova, 2014) and teaching practices since the communicative approach was introduced in our classrooms. "Active use of the target language by students is considered to be an integral part of language acquisition" (Nunan, 1999). The main obstacles on the way to the successful mastery of oral speech are lack of linguistic means for expressing students' ideas and lack of interest in the topics discussed. Lack of linguistic means, both grammatical and lexical is seen by teachers as the major barrier on the way to speech production. According to the opinions given by the teachers in their blogs (Sulkarnaeva et al, 2018) and notes added to the answers in our survey, students abstain from expressing their opinion due to the low level of their communicative competence (teachers mean poor knowledge of grammar and vocabulary under study).

The desire to participate in communication involves, first of all, an impact on the motivational sphere of the interlocutors. Motivation is the main acting force, stimulating speech, when speakers try to solve communicative tasks and verbalize (as far as the communicative competence in the target language allows) their speech intent. When a communicative task is important to speakers, it will have priority over the search for linguistic means for verbalizing their ideas. Consequently, both teachers and researchers suggest relevant topics that would be able to motivate their students to produce meaningful utterances in the target language.

However, the topics that teachers suggest for classroom discussions fail to arouse students' enthusiastic response. After prefabricated conventional phrases are exhausted and all the prompts are included into their supposedly real dialogues, students stop. The seemingly exciting, in teachers' opinion, conversation skids to a halt. No heated debates, or at least lively talk follows. The usual explanation that teachers give in this case is students' limited vocabulary. However, our experience, which has given impetus to exploring this issue, has given rise to a different hypothesis: the point is the topic. When choosing a topic for a classroom discussion, teachers rely on the course book, or their own ideas about the relevance of the subject-matter content for students' utterances. In this article we emphasize the special importance of studying the personality of students in terms of reliance on the social experience they have

acquired while developing the skills of foreign language speaking. Approaching this issue empirically, we have concluded that the most successful topics for discussion are cultural and ethical issues relevant to the audience, that is, the topics widely discussed by the society and affecting the sphere of students' interests.

### 2 Methods

Our research is based on empirical evidence, observation and quantitative analysis. We have collected numerical data concerning teachers and students' preferences for topics meant to motivate students to generate meaningful utterances and take part in classroom discussions. To this end we have conducted a survey based on a self-completed questionnaire, including only one question: "Which talking topic gets your students speaking?" (for teachers) and "Which topic do you enjoy talking about in your English class?" (for students). We have used the Student's t-distribution method for statistical analysis.

### 3 Results and Discussion

Teaching a foreign language in Russian schools is based on the principles of the communicative approach, in particular, on the principle of learner-oriented learning, when the interests and needs of language learners come to the fore. Pedagogical decentralization makes the learner a subject of communication, which enhances his/her speech activity and autonomy: "The topics and situations of communication should correspond to the students' real interests and capabilities, their needs, be personalized, creating conditions for their creative activity and independence" (Galeeva et al, 2011; Qiuxia, 2008).

It would be a simple task just to resort to students personal experiences every time we develop speech skills. However, teachers of English all over the world express their concerns about their students' unwillingness to participate in conversations in the target language. Just to name a few: "As an ESL teacher in China, one thing that we all struggle with on more than one occasion is getting our students to speak. I can recall countless stories exchanged between me and my fellow expat teachers involving a well-planned lesson brought to its knees by silence. Often, the problem is not the structure of the lesson or the activities: it's the topic. If students are not familiar with the topic or are just not very interested in it, a well thought out lesson can feel like a waste" (Villalobos Antunez & Bello, 2014).

"Trainers and teachers who are involved in developing students' English speaking skills often get frustrated because some students do not attempt to speak at all. When the teacher wants the students to be active they prefer to be passive. This is a universal problem. The teacher faced with a serious problem of passivity among students looks for a solution to make them active participants but doesn't succeed always. Why does it happen?" As an answer to this question prompted by a teacher of English in India, Albert P'Rayan suggests make students feel comfortable discussing any topic. He goes on to say that some topics may not arouse their interest at all. Prof. P'Rayan believes that the controversial nature of the topics can make all students express their views, even students with low level of proficiency (Huijie et al, 2017).

According to the guidelines in Russian teachers' books for schoolchildren learning a foreign language, teachers should focus on personal problems: "Students not only get acquainted with English as a means of expressing their own thoughts, but use it to realize their communicative intentions. In this way, schoolchildren are aware of the possibilities of self-realization by means of the target language. For example, they learn to talk about their problems in communicating with their peers, teachers and parents (Unit 4)" (Shostrom, 1967).

It seems obvious that most willingly we talk about ourselves and those things that we personally care about, that is, things based on our knowledge, experience and feelings. This method of teaching is often called personalization, which has a connotation of self-disclosure, even confession. Therefore, teachers should be warned of being cautious when referring to personal experiences and the relationships of students with their friends and relatives (Afanasyeva et al, 2016) not to build a communication barrier.

To maintain objectivity, we must admit that teachers do not require that students be absolutely truthful when giving information about themselves and their preferences – the main thing is fluency and accuracy. This thesis is underlined in almost all recommendations for tests of various levels: the examiners are interested in your communication skills, not in the actual information. By the time students reach the final stage of their schooling, the Russian National Exam, they are well aware of the “hypocrisy” of foreign language communicative tasks: the teacher pretends to be interested, and the student is supposedly talking about his/her interests and preferences. But what about generating real speech? What are teachers to do to get their students interested and willing to express their own opinion? Sincerity is especially important when working with younger students who do not realize the duality of our pedagogical intentions: the teacher solves his/ her educational tasks, and the student participates in real communication. The teacher’s insincerity can injure a child so severely that it will cease to participate in formal communications, which do not give emotional feedback. In this case, the teacher is perceived as an active manipulator (Huijie et al, 2017), who uses communication tasks to solve their own problems, which have nothing to do with real-life situations.

To find out the preferences of teachers and students with regard to conversational topics, we have conducted a survey. The analysis of the research results is to understand if teachers take their students real interests into account when suggesting topics for classroom discussions, or they rely on their own assumptions about what students like and dislike. Seventeen topics are included in our questionnaire (see the table below):

Table 1. Analyzing the results of the questionnaire

No	Topics	Teachers	Students	Difference
1	Ethical Issues	4	27	23
2	Cultural Issues	28	74	46
3	Current Social and Political Issues	13	46	33
4	Personal Problems	55	9	46
5	Family Relationships	55	12	43
6	School Activities	41	29	12
7	Maintaining Friendship	36	35	1
8	Health	20	31	11
9	Food	43	37	6
10	Sport	46	31	15
11	Music	38	43	5
12	Hobby	40	47	7
13	Clothes	27	27	No
14	Jobs	18	58	40
15	Computers (Internet)	40	31	9
16	Money	23	31	8
17	Crime	9	23	14

The table does not represent a complete list of topics discussed in the English language classroom. The purpose of this research is to compare teachers and students’ expectations concerning the most welcome topics for communication tasks. Thus, we have not included the popular topic “Travelling” as the topic “Cultural Issues” is supposed to cover the area of sightseeing and cross-cultural interactions. While answering to the questions, both the teachers and students were asked to add any information they found relevant to the problem under study.

Eighty three school teachers from different schools in Tatarstan (Russia) were asked to underline the topics believed to be interesting enough to get their children speaking in the target language. The same question was asked of eighty three schoolchildren from different grades of schools in Kazan. No names or other personal information was required, the students were requested to state their grade and gender to make our conclusions more accurate. If not willing to participate, both teachers and students were free to leave our questions unanswered.

Our initial assumption was that one of the main reasons why teachers fail to get their students speaking is the wrong topic chosen for classroom discussions as these topics are either suggested by the textbook and teachers fail to adapt them to their students’ interests, or teachers themselves have inaccurate information about the preferences of those they teach. After first tentative oral investigations into the problem, we conducted a written survey. The only question asked was: “Which talking topic gets your students speaking?” Initially, the questionnaire contained one more question – “Which talking topic fails to stimulate speaking?”, but it was left unanswered by the majority of the teachers. Consequently, only one question remained.

The analysis has yielded results that have exceeded our concerns: very few topics were found equally interesting for conversations in the classrooms both by teachers and students: “Clothes” (27 – 27), “Maintaining Friendship” (36 – 35), “Food” (43 – 37) and “Music” (38 – 43). However, it is only one third, or about a half of the participants, who chose these topics as motivating ones. Those, who favoured the topic “Cultural Issues” constitute about 90% of the students and 32% of the teachers (28 -74), which means teachers definitely underestimate their students’ interest in art and creative development.

Instead, teachers are all for discussing personal issues, the topic which is among the ones least favoured by students (55 - 9). This dislike can be easily explained by students’ unwillingness to make public certain private problems, which they would like to conceal. In his blog, Scott Thornbury refers to the issue of personalization as “a pretext for a little bit of creative practice”, which, however, may inadvertently uncover childhood tragedies. Neither have students chosen “family relationships” as the topic they would like to discuss, for it might create “potentially awkward moments in the classroom”. Accordingly, Scott Thornbury asks the following questions: “But, irrespective of whether we think it’s good for them, do learners actually *like* it? Do they like being quizzed about what they or their relatives were doing 10 days/months/years ago? Do they expect it? Do they see the value of it?” (Afanasyeva et al, 2016).

To answer these questions, we will explore other topics suggested for classroom discussions. As we see, there exists a large divergence of opinions on the topic “Ethical Issues” and “Current Social and Political Issues”. Judging by the table, teachers fail to see that their students are mature enough to speak their minds when it comes to ethical (4 – 27), political or social problems (13 - 46). The same gap exists between teachers and students’ preferences for the topic “Jobs” (18 – 58). We would like to mention here that among students who have chosen “Jobs” as the topic they enjoy discussing are not only senior students but also children from Grades 4 and 6 (aged 11 – 13).

Teachers believe students are keen on discussing music (48), sport (46), food (43) and hobbies (40). The table shows that “hobby” is also among the favourite topics with students. It is

not surprising as everybody would like to speak about things interesting to him or her. The problem is, whether others would display the same interest and join in the conversation if this hobby is beyond their preferences. This topic, simple as it seems, is a great challenge for teachers in terms of communicative-oriented activities.

To find out which of the topics are most preferable both for teachers and students, we have used Student's t-distribution test.

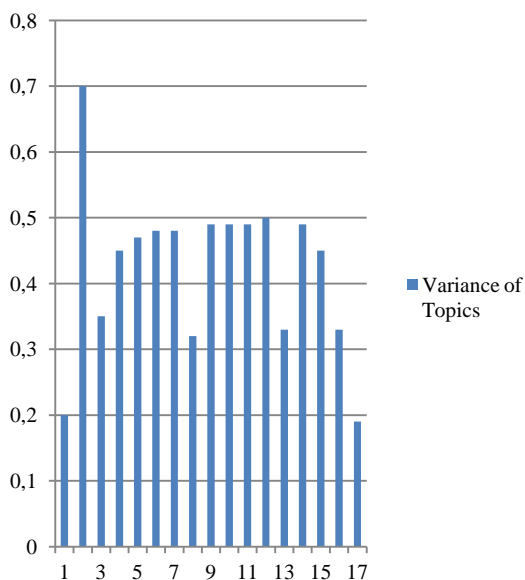


Fig 1. Variance of Topics

According to the data in the graph, this comparison has yielded the following results: "Cultural Issues" is far more popular than any other topic in Table 1. Least motivating are "Ethical Issues" and "Crime", although students are more willing to discuss them than teachers presume. "Family Relationships", "School Activities", "Maintaining Friendship", "Food", "Sport", "Music", "Hobby" and "Jobs" are the topics, which occupy middle position among the preferences. It means teachers have to do more preliminary research into their students' actual interests before formulating a communicative task for classroom discussions.

#### 4 Summary

The development of speech skills is a challenging task for foreign language teachers as their students often feel reluctant to join in the conversation about the topic suggested for classroom discussions. Besides lack of linguistic means for verbalizing ideas in the target language, the reason is the topic itself. As our survey shows, teachers believe that "Personal Problems" is one of the most motivating issues, which can get their students speaking. However, students regard this topic as one of the least welcome for discussions. This fact (among other differences between teachers and students' preferences shown in Table 1) is the evidence that teachers rely on their own assumptions about what arouses their students' interest in the subject of conversation and makes them willingly participate in classroom discussions. Students' unwillingness to make their personal problems public is not taken into consideration, or is dismissed as far-fetched for no sincere confessions are required, just the use of prefabricated phrases appropriate in this conversational situation. Teachers underestimate their students' interest in cultural, political and social issues.

#### 5 Conclusions

Thus, the personalization of developing productive skills in a foreign language classroom implies greater targeting in the organization of educational activity: from the most general guidelines for the differentiation of tasks in terms of the level of

complexity of language material (accounting for the level of students' communicative competence) to taking into account ethnocultural interaction in the process of communication and psychological characteristics of the individual (identification of the type of personality), as well as students' social experience and their relationships in the family and the immediate environment.

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