Teaching Practices Applied in Preparation for Teleconference Participation

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Abstract

The invention of e-mail and satellite links has undoubtedly limited the amount of time that today's business people spend on the move. In order to reduce costs and improve the flow of information, entrepreneurs have decided to take advantage of teleconferencing. The parallel phenomenon is the growth of English as an international language. As a result, business associates spend much time learning it. Actually, their command of English is fairly good after graduation, but it may turn out to be insufficient as far as its practical use is concerned. Most graduate trainees have attained a relatively good level of English grammar, a very good knowledge of English vocabulary and quite good listening comprehension. The latter seems to be most fruitful, however this ability does not make those young people feel free of stress while participating in their first teleconferences.

This paper presents teaching methods applied during English classes, the aim of which is to prepare IT specialists for participation in teleconferences. Teachers are supposed to become acquainted with both specialist terminology and business jargon used by employees. Teachers should also be good observers and excellent mind readers. They are expected to be trustworthy passive participants of real teleconferences in order to be able to arrange teleconference simulations during English lessons. Students mainly focus on improving their speaking skills to make communication smoother and clearer. In the meantime, they gain more confidence and openness, which leads to improved teamwork.

To sum up, the presented customised teaching service requires much commitment, self-development, an individual approach and readiness to provide not only linguistic but also psychological support to students. The conclusion is that the range of the teacher's work has been greatly extended. The teacher has started to play a complex role of consultant, mentor, proofreader, communication mistake detector and psychoanalyst.

1. Introduction

The progress of English towards world-language status has been observed for several decades. Practically all universities offer English courses at levels ranging from B1 to C2. Having qualified, students apply for their first full-time jobs, where every employee is expected to be fluent in English. Many students start their professional careers during internships, preferably abroad. This helps them gain real job experience and develop their English speaking skills.

When such students find employment in multinationals and join teams of workers who have been regularly participating in teleconferences, they may feel linguistically lost due to lack of experience in discussing business issues in this form. Writing and understanding short text messages, e-mails or corporate documents in English, as well as attending training courses conducted in English, do not pose a problem for them. However, participation in teleconferences requires mastery of a different kind of knowledge. It is a combination of specialist terms associated with particular business issues that teleconferences deal with, fixed collocations or even the whole sentences often used by speakers. The psychological side of taking part in teleconferences is essential too. Stress resistance and the ability to keep focused are equally important. At this point, one might ask what all those things have to do with English teaching. I would not know myself if I had not accepted a job in an international software development company whose computer program testers and their managers found communication during teleconferences less than effective. My task was to improve language skills of the Polish team so that they could comprehend every aspect discussed and be able to express themselves with greater precision. What follows is a presentation of the way I prepared for the classes, the teaching methods I applied and my discoveries which led to both the development of my students and my development as a teacher.

2. Participation in teleconferences and arrangement of follow-up classes
2.1 Teacher's role during teleconferences
The teacher is a passive participant in a teleconference. Appropriate permission should be stated in the contract signed by the teacher and the company. The teacher should also obtain written permission to take notes during teleconferences to collect teaching material. The teacher's participation requires much commitment, attention and studying. In every enterprise, employees use both the terminology of the business sector they work in, and corporate jargon, which is created to accelerate and simplify communication to the extreme.

2.2 Observations
While being a passive participant I collected and studied many words and expressions which were not clear to me at first. My fluent English turned out not to be enough to understand them. For example:
- *'feature tests, smoke tests and regression tests'* were discussed;
- *'upgrade kick-off'', 'update rollout'* or *'rollback'* *were frequently mentioned;*
- *'hotfix and deployment'* seemed quite basic to them, but not necessarily to me, when I heard: '*Hotfix will be deployed tomorrow'.*

A teacher must have the courage to say, '*I don't know what it means',* and ask for explanation*.*

2.3 Classes
The course consisted of both group classes and individual consultation. All examples presented here were actually discussed. For homework the students were asked to learn the corporate idiolect vocabulary by heart. Often, memorising whole statements and questions was required. Then, simulations of teleconferences were arranged during which I was sitting in a different room and conducting the same sort of discussions, using the same questions and answers as the ones I heard while collecting the data. In this way the students could practise what they had previously learnt. Face-to-face contact with the teacher creates a completely different atmosphere, so conducting those talks via the intranet was a good idea.

3. Native vs non-native
3.1 Tempo, phonetics and vocabulary
Teleconference participants to whom I listened were both native and non-native speakers of English. The native ones were British and American, whereas the non-native ones came from Poland, the Czech Republic, Switzerland, Austria, Spain, Russia, Croatia, Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania and Estonia.

For the Polish team it was much harder to follow native speakers. Moreover, it was easier for them to understand American English than British English, regardless of the speed of speaking. American pronunciation seemed clearer, whereas British was often perceived as clusters of incomprehensible words which, when presented by me during the follow-up class, turned out to be known to most of the students. The vocabulary that the British speakers chose was more sophisticated than words and expressions frequently used by Americans. For instance:
- Instead of simply saying, *'I **know** it', 'I don't know that'* versus *'I'm **familiar with** it", "I'm not **acquainted** with it'*
- *'Are you **kidding** me?'* versus *'Are you **taking the mickey out of me**?'*
- *'Why can't we have deployment on 3rd May? Is that **a bank holiday** in your country, guys?'* versus *'Is that **a public holiday/ a national holiday** in your country?'*

In the case of the latter example, my students gave me puzzled looks, so I quickly nodded my head to confirm that it was, but in class all of told me they just understood the expression **'a bank holiday'** as **'a weekday when banks are closed'** and nothing else.

3.2 Psychology
From the psychological point of view, two matters raise interest. Firstly, it is less stressful for non-natives to talk to other non-natives. My students said:
- *'I feel no fear when I don't know how to say something because my interlocutor may have the same problem due to the fact that the language we communicate in is not his or her mother tongue either.'*
- *'I'm not ashamed of making grammar mistakes because the others make mistakes too. The most important thing is that we understand each other despite those mistakes.'*

Secondly, a psychological barrier may occur because of some earlier personal experiences. One of the students conversed with me without any significant problems and was even able to joke in English,

which proved to me that he was able to talk and interact in English in a stress-free situation. However, during teleconferences he was hardly able to say anything and could not understand much, especially when a native started to speak. Eventually I learnt, he had negative feelings about British English speakers after unpleasant meetings with the HR Manager, who was British, and whose main job was to cut expenditure. Having to speak English, and thinking about being made redundant caused anxiety. The student confessed: *'I have problems with understanding Brits because I associate them with the man whose appearance was like an infusion of bad energy into our company'*. It took much mutual effort to eliminate this prejudice. Finally, the student understood it is not nationality that matters but personality and circumstances.

4. Grammar

At this stage of learning, detailed presentations and grammatical drill exercises do not make much sense. One of my students explained what happens in a slightly philosophical way: *'For me, participating in teleconferences is like going out into the ocean. When I go out into the ocean, I choke. You see, when I do an exercise, I only focus on grammar, but when I speak, I get everything mixed up'*. Another one said: *'I stopped studying English grammar not because I developed a certain level of perfection, but a certain level of resistance'.* A consequence of this resistance was not using the Present Perfect tense at all.

As we teachers like to think of ourselves as pioneers, I decided to find my own unconventional ways of explaining the rules of English grammar to my students.

4.1 The *'1'* and *'0'* code

First, students are told to look at both Present Perfect and Past Simple as tenses referring to the past. A common question posed at this moment is: *'Why do I need two tenses to describe actions which took place in the past?'*. My advice is to give the following explanation: **Imagine that the use of Past Simple and Present Perfect is like applying the '1' and '0' code. If you say when something happened or the time of the given event is known to everybody, you use Past Simple. If you mention the time expression, you use Present Perfect. It is exactly the same as using 1s and 0s.**

you say WHEN	→	you use PAST SIMPLE
you DON'T say WHEN	→	you use PRESENT PERFECT
you say WHEN	→	you DON'T use HAVE
you DON'T say WHEN	→	you use HAVE

It is like the use of:
1 → 0

Figure 1. Visualisation of the '1' and '0' code

e.g. I <u>have</u> finished the report. It's on your desk. → I finished the report <u>yesterday</u>. It's on your desk.
At this point my Present Perfect-resistant student exclaimed: *'And say no more!'.* During the next teleconference he started to use Present Perfect. He has used it correctly ever since.

4.2 Stairs

To teach the sequence of tenses to IT experts I invented a method which I call *'STAIRS'.* It is a very simplified approach, but it works.
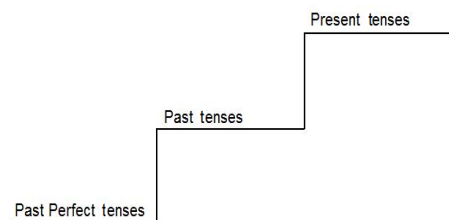
Present tenses

Past tenses

Past Perfect tenses

Figure 2. Visualisation of Stairs

The use of tenses is compared to walking up and down the stairs. It works great with such tenses as Present Simple, Present Continuous, Past Simple, Past Continuous and Past Perfect in the case of B1 students. When it comes to B2, C1 and C2 students, obviously more tenses are incorporated. The Past Simple/ Past Perfect combination well exemplifies this method. Students are asked to imagine their colleague Tom coming late for a meeting with a Very Important Person. Their corporate standards of conduct state clearly that it is totally inappropriate to enter the meeting in that situation. Asked by the superior to report what happened one should say: *'When Tom arrived the meeting had already begun'.* Then ask them to go on the stairs, stand on the step representing Past tenses (*Tom arrived late*) and go one step down (*the meeting had already begun before Tom arrived*). That practical visualisation works.

4.3 The 3 Lego blocks method

To teach the correct word order, I put 3 Lego blocks on my desk and ask students to divide the sentences they build into 3 parts. They look at the blocks and say:

- *'The manual (1)*   *is not (2)*   *ready (3).'*
- *' I (1)*   *will fix (2)*   *this bug (3)'*
- *'The new release*   *has been put (2)*   *into production (3).'*

This may remind textbook drill exercises, but a significant difference is that students form their own sentences; they talk about what they are interested in, so the range of vocabulary they use is the same as during teleconferences. As they focus on those 3 blocks, they realise the fixed order of a sentence, which I emphasise by saying that in English sentence structure generally follows the same pattern: *'subject - verb - and the rest', 'one - two - three', making gestures with my right hand at the same time.*

5. Conclusion

Today's education market makes language teachers invent new modern classroom strategies. One of them is the customised teaching service presented in this paper, which shows how complex the role of a language teacher has become. The service comprises elements of classic and unconventional teaching, lecturing, acting, IT skills and even psychological coaching that leads to overcoming students' fear of making mistakes. After all, every mistake is a gift to the class.