Dagmara Gałajda

# Developing speaking skills in conversation classes

**Abstract:** This chapter focuses on the issues and challenges connected with teaching conversation classes in a university context. It briefly discusses the theoretical background of communication studies related to communicative competence and psychological aspects of communicative behaviour of a language learner, that is, willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and self-perception. The section devoted to implications gives hints and possible solutions which can be implemented in order to make conversation classes engaging and effective. The final part of the present chapter offers a list of tasks and questions which can be used in the process of designing, planning, and conducting conversation classes.

**Keywords:** conversation classes, communicative competence, willingness to communicate

## 1. Introduction

University students associate teaching speaking with preparation for their final high school exam: they learn how to describe pictures, talk about themselves, and discuss simple topics with the examiner. In other words, they learn how to complete a specific task to get maximum points. Conversation classes are much different because here the aim is to teach students how to communicate in a foreign language effectively and naturally. Thus, the main aim is to develop communicative competence and investigate communicative behaviour. The students should get familiar with such notions as willingness to communicate (instead of saying "I am not a talker"), communication apprehension ("it's because of stress"), and self-perception ("I will never be as good as my friends").

The majority of students think they know the concepts mentioned above, but the truth is that they need teacher's help to discover and investigate their communicative behaviour.

Next, both teachers and students face many difficulties regarding the conversation course. They need to work in a mixed-level group, with the students who have different learning histories and who experienced various methods of FL instruction. Teachers are obliged to find the best ways of correcting and assessing the students, which is never easy, for example, due to the size of the group. The major issue is to choose/create suitable, effective, and engaging communication activities. Planning the conversation course and single lessons is very often the most challenging task for a teacher. Despite the difficulty of the task, I strongly believe that conversation classes can be productive and successful, and the key to it is teacher's awareness: he or she should know that teaching students how to communicate is much more than just giving them a topic for discussion and listening/asking questions from time to time/correcting some mistakes. The aim of every lesson should be to introduce a particular concept of communication, train students, let them practise as much as possible, and give them feedback as often as possible. Such a framework of classes is a prerequisite for realising the aim of the conversation course.

## 2. Theoretical background

The communicative approach to language teaching is nothing new. It can be said that all of the coursebooks aim at the development of communicative competence since this is the core of the syllabi. But what stands behind the notion of communicative competence? For Hymes (1972: 42), communicative competence is the mastery of "patterns of sociolinguistic behaviour of the target language." A more developed definition is the one provided by Canale and Swain (1980), for whom communicative competence comprises four competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic, which are fully integrated when a language learner becomes a proficient language user. The framework provided by Canale and Swain is to a large extent inadequate for primary and secondary education. It is nearly impossible to choose and realise the material which would facilitate the development of discourse or strategic competence of primary/high school students. Usually coursebooks (and teachers) aim at improving learners' grammatical competence since

the students need to pass their exams which are more grammar and vocabulary oriented rather than focused on communication. On the other hand, university is a place where teachers would like to concentrate on a further development of sociolinguistic and discourse competence since they believe that first year students come to their classes with an advanced level not only with reference to grammar, vocabulary, and, for example, pronunciation, but also with reference to communicative skills. Unfortunately, the situation is much different: the role of the university has changed and now university teachers are expected to develop all components of communicative competence and to integrate them, at least during first two or three years.

University teachers conducting conversation classes need to take into account one more aspect of language education, that is, personality variables and their influence on communication in both L1 and FL. Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a personality trait which can be defined as "an individual's general personality orientation towards talking" (McCroskey and Richmond 1987:131). It is believed to be influenced by two other factors, namely, communication apprehension, defined as "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey 1977: 28), and self-perceived communicative competence. All three variables can be measured with the use of questionnaires (described in Section 5.1 of this chapter) and used to analyse communicative behaviour of individual students. In primary and secondary school, apprehensive students with a negative self-perception can be poor at speaking, but thanks to getting good marks from written tests/assignments, they might get positive final marks. The problem appears when the assessment changes to separate marks from grammar, comprehension, writing, etc., and speaking changes to classes fully devoted to conversation, where university teachers evaluate communicative skills. In such a context, students with a low level of willingness to communicate, strong communication apprehension, and negative self-perception will not have an opportunity to get a better mark due to their personality traits being almost non-communication oriented. This means that language educators teaching conversation classes at the tertiary level need to pay careful attention to students' linguistic competence and affective variables, if they want to create effective communicators instead of "speakers" of a FL. Students unwilling to talk or with a poorly developed communicative competence are not the only challenges for the teachers of conversation. Some other problematic issues of conducting conversation classes will be discussed in the following section.

## 3. Developing FL speaking skills of students: issues and challenges

Conversation classes have been labelled as the easiest classes to conduct for the teacher and to pass for the students. I remember that when I asked one of the lecturers for a piece of advice on teaching conversation, the person answered: "Just let them speak!" Having taught many students in private language schools, I knew that it was not so easy to involve people in any type of verbal communication in a foreign language, especially when the learners were adults. During one of my first conversation classes, I realised that I was right: making a short introduction to the topic and next asking questions was not enough. The students said nothing.

This situation was a critical incident which made me think analytically about my methods of teaching speaking to university students. Problems which are noticed first appear to be purely administrative: the number of students in the group is usually much over twenty, which makes it particularly difficult to teach speaking effectively and to develop communicative competence of an individual student. This problem is difficult to tackle since the number of students in a group depends on numerous decisions and regulations which come from the ministry and/or the university itself. The second administrative issue is the size and composition of the room in which the classes take place. The worst option is to have conversation classes in a room specially designed for lectures, where the seats are organised in a so-called theatre style. Such organisation of the room makes it impossible for the teacher to listen to individual students, correct them, or pair up differently for each activity. Changing places takes so much time that usually teachers give up changing pairs and/or listening/talking to individual students apart from those sitting close to them.

The next issue is connected with the heterogeneity of the groups in terms of language proficiency, learning history, and communicative behaviour of individual students. To become a student of English philology in Poland, one does not need to take any entrance exam. A student is accepted/rejected on the basis of his or her *matura* exam (that is, high school final exam). It means that a student's language proficiency is verified (apart from the written part, which is the same for every student in the country) by *matura* examiners, not academic staff who will teach the potential university students in the future. As a result, first year groups are composed of very proficient, average, and weak, or even very weak students. Of course, with time the groups usually become smaller

since the weakest students do not pass their exams, especially practical English exam with the conversation component. Consequently, in the third year, the groups become more homogeneous when it comes to their general language proficiency and communicative competence, which makes them much easier to teach. However, it is obvious that the first two years might be focused on the development of either weaker and less proficient students or the strongest and very proficient ones, none of which is recommended.

Students who take part in conversation classes have different learning histories. Some of them were taught only grammar/vocabulary by doing hundreds of exercises. In such classes, a teacher usually covers the material from a coursebook, speaks more Polish than English, and does not focus on speaking (sometimes ignoring it altogether). In the majority of cases, the students followed a coursebook where there is usually one-three speaking activities per unit. The tasks very often aim at preparation for *matura* exam, and they are carried out as a pair work activity due to time limitations and the size of the learning group. Finally, a very small group of university students admit that their English classes in high school focused on the development of communicative competence and that they practised different types of speaking activities. After analysing the learning history of the university students, it becomes obvious that the majority of them might have problems not only because of their lack of proficiency but also because of the lack of training in the field of communicative activities. In the university context, such activities include individual/group presentation, discussion (whole group, smaller groups, pair work) stimulated by a quotation/picture/video clip, debate, role plays, finding arguments for and against, and others.

Taking into account my interest in communicative behaviour of a language learner, throughout my teaching practice, I have tried to pay special attention to such concepts as communication apprehension, willingness to communicate, and self-perception. While language teachers are familiar with the first notion, the other two are not so popular. Everyone who has ever tried to learn a foreign language knows the feeling of anxiety, which accompanies any kind of speaking practice. The results of my research (Gałajda 2017) suggest that apprehensive students are also unwilling to communicate and that they perceive their competence in a negative way. All those three factors are interrelated, and they influence communicative behaviour of a language learner. Thus, language teachers face the problem of students who are reluctant to speak not only because they suffer from communication apprehension but also because they are unwilling to talk (by nature and/or in a given situation) and/or their self-perception is negative. In the university context,

the situation is even more complicated compared to a high school or private language school. Studying English philology, the students communicate in a foreign language all the time, for the purpose of different subjects, not only conversation classes. Additionally, the communication takes place in various contexts: public speaking, private conversation, communication with a university friend, acquaintance, and stranger, communication during a task or examination, and on other occasions (Gałajda 2017).

Mixed-level groups, previous teaching techniques, and psycholinguistic issues are not the only difficulties the teachers have to cope with. Another one is the syllabus (usually a list of topics) according to which conversation classes are conducted. The range of topics is very broad, and it seems that everybody can find something interesting. In my opinion, the students can talk about any of the topics as long as the array of teaching techniques is very rich and the activities are short so that the students do not get bored too fast. In other words, the real problem is the choice and application of suitable methods and techniques, not the topic itself.

The final two problematic issues connected with teaching conversation classes are methods of correction and assessment. The first decision a university teacher needs to make is whether the classes or a given activity is focused on accuracy or fluency. It will determine the method of correction and its frequency. Again, the biggest problem here is the number of students in a group: it is impossible for the teacher to hear and correct the majority of the mistakes made by individual students. Usually, during each task, the teacher walks around the class and listens to students talking. The correction depends on the type of task and is less or more frequent. Major mistakes (for example made by a bigger number of students) are discussed after each task or at the end of the lesson. One of my biggest concerns has always been the scope of correction. What I mean by that is whether we should focus only on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation mistakes, or maybe the focus should also be on students' communicative skills. An attempt to answer this question will be made in the next section, concentrating on the implications for teachers.

Every academic course finishes with a credit, usually obtained on the basis of a test (or tests), a written or oral exam, an assignment written at home, or active participation in the class. None of the mentioned methods of assessment (apart from the last one) can be introduced in a conversation course. What students usually do to get a credit is an individual presentation and/or a mock exam conducted in pairs. A presentation is usually a short interactive lecture combined with some pair/group

work activities related to the topic of the presentation. The problem with this type of credit is connected with the student's anxiety, which might negatively affect performance. Another problem might appear during the presentation when the presenter asks questions/starts a discussion and nobody wants to say anything. Consequently, it might happen that only two people are talking (the presenter and one of the strongest/most willing-to-communicate students or the teacher), while the rest of the group spend their conversation classes in silence. On the other hand, the mock exam seems to be a better option because the students can see what the real exam will look like. Also, they are given a detailed feedback, thanks to which they know what to work on. A mock exam is usually a pair work discussion stimulated by a picture, quotation, or a short piece of text. The problem is that a mock exam takes time and usually one or two meetings in a semester are devoted to it.

In my teaching, I have been using a system introduced by the coordinator of the practical subjects, in which students' competence is assessed in four categories: grammar/vocabulary, pronunciation, fluency, and communicative skills. In each category, the students can get from 0 to 5 points. Next, I sum up the points and decide (on the basis of the score prepared by the coordinator) which mark the student should get. The biggest difficulty here lies in the assessment of communicative skills, which encompass the ability to interact, the ability to perform the task, and conversation management skills (e.g., turn-taking). It might pose problems to the teacher, especially during classes when everybody is doing a task with their partner, and so the classroom becomes a bustling shopping mall. Such conditions require from the teacher much experience and concentration – he or she needs to focus on one person and assess him/her properly using the points mentioned above.

Despite the fact that all of the issues connected with teaching conversation in the university context are serious, there are ways of improving the course so that the students learn not only how to speak English but also how to communicate effectively in a foreign language. Some hints and suggestions will be given in the next section devoted to implications for teachers.

## 4. Discussion and possible solutions to problems

In this section, I would like to share my ideas connected with teaching conversation classes. While it is obvious that creating nearly ideal

conditions for teaching speaking in a university context is very difficult, the truth is that it is not impossible. Being aware of the limitations of this type of learning environment, the teacher can plan effective lessons which maximise the development of communicative competence of an individual student.

### 4.1 The room is too small, the group is too big

Not much can be done about the size of the group. As it has already been mentioned, the size of the group is difficult to change due to administrative issues. But we can try to adjust our lesson plan to different student groupings. Pair work and group work always work well because the majority of students like cooperation. However, we should remember to mix the pairs/groups to give everybody the opportunity to talk to many different people in the group. My research has shown that after a few months of mixing students for each task it has become natural for them to talk to every student in the group. The students claimed that their willingness to communicate developed in general and that their level of communication apprehension was much lower. Also, their self-perception changed due to the fact that they could compare their competence with that of many other students, not only with that of their best friend(s), as used to be the case. In other words, grouping students can be very beneficial not only for the development of communicative competence but also psychological factors which shape communicative behaviour of a language learner.

The problem with conducting classes in a room suitable for lectures but not for teaching practical subjects can be very frustrating. Even a perfectly prepared speaking activity will not work in a lecture hall. Does it mean that our conversation classes are doomed to failure due to the size of a classroom? We may try to swap the room for the one which can be organised, for example, in a U-shape classroom. What I sometimes do is come to the classroom earlier and ask the students to rearrange the room: move tables, leave chairs only, and organise space so that the students can move around without major difficulties. Of course, such a decision cannot be made on the spot. The teacher needs to think it over before the classes, while planning a lesson. From my experience, I can say that students like the idea of rearranging the room – they feel more comfortable when the classroom is slightly messy because in this way it becomes more informal and more natural.

### 4.2 Individual students overwhelm the rest of the group

Every group has its leader(s). Usually the same people are the most talkative during conversation classes. They can keep on talking endlessly, which might turn every speaking activity into a listening comprehension task. The rest of the group are often pleased because they do not have to take part in the discussion. However, there are also students (less competent, more anxious, less confident, etc.) who would like to share their opinion and join the conversation, but they find it very difficult to break through. Consequently, weaker students are demotivated and do not even try to say anything.

University groups will always be mixed-ability and mixed-level groups. The point is to try to adjust the syllabus, teaching methods, and techniques so that every group of students in a class (the shy, weak, anxious, strong, and confident ones) can get an opportunity to develop their communicative skills and competence. Again, different student groupings and mixing the students will be very useful. In groups dominated by a few individuals, whole-group discussions should be done occasionally or as an introduction to a pair/group work activity. General questions can be brainstormed in groups and next shared with the whole class by group representatives. Such solutions show the students that they are equally important and that their performance is appreciated by the teacher. In terms of pairing up the students, I strongly recommend both: a strong student joining a weaker one and a student cooperating with a student of a similar level and communicative competence (strong students together, weaker students together). Both solutions are effective and beneficial as long as they are introduced interchangeably by the teacher.

### 4.3 The psychological aspect of communicative competence

When I asked some time ago a few university teachers why their students did not talk during conversation classes, the majority of them said that it was due to students' shyness, anxiety, general nervousness, lack of linguistic competence, and poor pronunciation, among others. I agree that all these factors might influence participation in classroom activities. However, I would like to add that teachers should be more aware of other psychological aspects which influence communication in a FL classroom, namely, willingness to communicate, communication apprehension, and self-perception. All three constructs might be measured by the teacher with ready-made questionnaires (mentioned in

Section 2) and next interpreted together with the group as a pair/group work activity. Such a way of using communication research measures can provide the teacher with a broad picture of the communicative behaviours in a group. Moreover, such activities might acquaint the students with the communicative concepts and make them more aware of their individual preferences. As a result, the teacher knows more about his or her students and can adapt speaking activities aimed at more/less willing-to-speak students, those who are more/less apprehensive, those who have developed positive self-concept, or those who still need to work on it. It does not mean that the teacher needs to become an expert in the field of communicative behaviour, but basic knowledge and analysis of the group will definitely help to understand patterns of behaviour of individual students.

### 4.4 Syllabus design and students with little/no experience in conversation classes

Syllabus design for conversation classes is regarded by many as one of the easiest to prepare. That is a false assumption since preparing a list of topics interesting for students is a tall order. Obviously, there is a syllabus prepared by the coordinator, and teachers need to stick to it. However, the list is so long that every teacher/group can find something interesting. I start every semester by showing the whole list of topics to the students, asking them to: (1) choose five they would like to discuss; (2) narrow the topics down by writing questions, concepts, phrases, and single words connected with the theme; and (3) add to every chosen topic the type of activity which they think will be suitable for it (pair work, discussion, debate, role play, presentation, project work, etc.). Next, I collect all the notes and analyse them. Together with the whole group, we create our own, personalised syllabus, which might motivate the students to participate more willingly and actively in the classes.

Despite the fact that the majority of English coursebooks aim at the development of communicative competence, students very often complain that their English lessons in high school focused mainly on completing grammar, vocabulary, and listening/reading comprehension activities, and on written assignments. As a result, the students speak English, but they do not communicate in this language. For example, they can describe a picture, but they cannot discuss it with their partner by going beyond what it shows, analysing the concepts rather than presented objects. My main advice is to treat the students (especially in their first year) as *carte blanche*: as if they never attended conversation

classes. The major mistake we make as teachers is the presupposition that the students are effective communicators and that they just have to polish their (already advanced) communicative competence with all its components. The truth is that they know English, but even if their linguistic competence is satisfactory, they might not know how to communicate. In other words, teachers need to familiarise students with the activities which they introduce, give model of, practise, and focus on: presentation, debate, giving arguments for/against, negotiating, introducing a topic, asking and answering questions with precision, choosing suitable register, interacting with a partner, taking turns, planning their speech, and many others. The improvement of linguistic competence will happen naturally, as long as the students actively participate in the activities, are corrected, and receive regular feedback and assessment of their skills.

### 4.5 How to correct and assess communicative performance

When thinking about correction in the context of conversation classes, teachers need to accept the fact that they will not correct all mistakes of all students in a group. This is why each activity used in the lesson should be planned in a way to give the teacher an opportunity to correct at least some of the students. The teacher can note down the mistakes and next discuss them with the whole group, interrupt and discuss the mistakes on the spot, or give feedback to a person/pair after listening to a discussion. Any of these ways of correction are effective as long as they are introduced regularly and throughout the lesson. Correcting the students only during/after their presentation and/or mock exam (happening once or twice a semester) is definitely not enough, even if the feedback is extensive. Developing communicative competence requires continuous correction, feedback, and assessment, so they have to be practised on a regular basis.

In my opinion, the system of assessment described in Section 3 (evaluation of student performance according to four categories) is very useful and easy to apply. However, it needs to be thought over even by the most experienced teachers before it is put into practice. Our coordinator proposes the following grading scale for each category: 1-1.5 points for poor performance, 2-2.5 points for unsatisfactory performance, 3-3.5 points for satisfactory performance, 4-4.5 points for good performance, and 5 points for excellent performance. This scale and the characteristics of particular points should be analysed by the teacher with reference to a given task. The teacher should know, for example,

what counts as "satisfactory communicative skills" and "good fluency" when it comes to finding arguments for and against. With time, using this system becomes natural for both the teachers and students, who, additionally, are more aware of the value of the points they get.

## 5. Sample questions and tasks for classroom use

In this section, I would like to focus on sample questions which can be introduced at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of a conversation course, together with some ideas for activities developing communicative competence of university students.

### 5.1 Getting familiar with basic concepts related to communicative behaviour of a language learner

I strongly recommend starting a conversation course with introducing certain concepts and brainstorming the ideas with the students. The same can be done in the middle of the course and at the end. Such a procedure will give an insight into the development of learners' communicative competence and their awareness. Also, the teacher will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of conducted activities and introduce some improvements.

The questions which are worth discussing with students are related to the issues touched upon in the previous sections. Some of them can be asked and answered in the forum; some should be answered anonymously. After introducing the topic, all questions should be discussed in pairs/groups so as to increase student talking time and to deepen students' reflections on the topic.

*What do you think about the size and organisation of our classroom?*
*What do you think about the size of our group?*
These two questions can be asked at the very beginning of the course as a form of small talk. These are not problematic issues for discussion and they can be easily followed by some other questions concerning, for example, the time of classes (too early, too late), the general organisation of the timetable, other rooms and other classes conducted in the same building compared to conversation classes, and different student groupings they encountered in other classes. From my observations,

students (especially in their first year) like this conversation, and they elaborate on different topics which I usually channel into a discussion on the importance of proxemics in the classroom environment (Hall 1966), giving examples from my teaching practice and showing some pictures. By answering these questions and taking part in this discussion, students become more aware of the role of classroom environment in their learning process.

*How were you taught English or any other FL in the past?*
Discussing learning history is always interesting for students. Suddenly, after high school, they meet new people who constitute their learning group, and they can compare their experiences. What is more, students' answers are very valuable for the teacher: he or she learns about their positive/negative experiences with learning FL, methods they prefer, and techniques they would rather avoid. I usually ask students to work in pairs, take a piece of paper, and note down one example of a positive experience and one example of a negative experience given by their partner. Next, the students change pairs, discuss what they have noted down, and gather information from a new partner. As a final task, we collect and write on the board all positive and negative experiences, and we discuss them together.

*What makes a good list of topics for conversation classes?*
In small groups (3–4 people), students take pieces of paper and write down five interesting topics for discussion. Next, they look at individual lists, eliminate multiple occurrences, and decide on five common topics. The teacher collects all the lists and compares them with the syllabus. Finally, the students can vote for 15 topics which will be discussed during the semester. This activity might look boring and time-consuming, but from a psychological point of view, it is very important, as it gives the group and individual students the power to decide. According to the rules governing positive classroom climate, groups which can at least partially decide about the content of the classes are more willing to cooperate and participate in the lessons. Also, this discussion can make the students aware of the fact that not all topics are as easy as they might seem (for instance, pets, family, or food) and that some apparently more complex topics do not have to be difficult (for instance, capital punishment or environmental issues).

*How do you assess the level of proficiency of the students in your group?*
Since the level of proficiency might be a sensitive topic for some of the students, this question usually poses some problems. That is the reason

why I always ask the students to write their answers on pieces of paper, without signing them. Also, the students are asked (1) not to use names (but to replace them with, for example, *some people* or *somebody*) and (2) to exchange the word *weak* for *green* and *strong* for *red*. Next, I collect all the papers, mix them, ask the students to pair up, and give each pair a random piece of paper with somebody's opinion. I also write on the board the rules for discussion, which are the same as for the written part. I have observed that the students truly value the fact that no names are used in the discussion and that they are not called "weak," "weaker," or "weakest," which might be difficult and discouraging for them, making them feel ashamed. I do not recommend sharing the results of pair-work discussion with the whole group. It is much better to extend the activity (by exchanging the pieces of paper again), walk around the classroom, discuss the opinions with individual pairs, or just listen. This activity is aimed at understanding other people and the general situation in the group. Both, weaker and stronger students can talk about how they feel during conversation classes due to their proficiency level. Teachers like such eye-opening activities because the group becomes more empathic and cooperative, which facilitates the following lessons.

*Error correction in speaking – the best ways?*
While it is true that it is the teacher who should create the system of assessment, the students can help to improve it. Their opinion might also be valid when it comes to the ways of correcting. What I recommend to do is to present a proposed system of assessment and the ways of correcting. Next, the students work in groups (3–4 people), and they discuss the teacher's proposals. Finally, they prepare their suggestions for improvement, which are next shared with the whole group. The teacher can be surprised how objective the students can be in their evaluation of the proposed systems. It is very beneficial for positive classroom dynamics since the students can see that they take responsibility for their learning process. Additionally, a conversation course is one of the most difficult to assess, and a student's speaking performance might be difficult to correct for the teacher. Hence students' opinions on the ways of assessment and correction are valuable for the teacher.

*How do you understand the concepts of (1) willingness to communicate, (2) communication apprehension, and (3) self-perception?*
The concepts mentioned in the questions have already been discussed in the theoretical part of the chapter and Section 3, devoted to issues

and concerns. Now the time has come to show how to familiarise the students with the notions. The easiest way would be to use the questionnaires measuring WTC, CA, and SPCC (self-perceived communicative competence). Teachers can use the original ones by McCroskey and Richmond (1982, 1987), McCroskey and McCroskey (1988), or the ones adapted for the purpose of the Polish context (Gałajda 2017). By asking themselves the questions: *How willing am I to…/How apprehensive do I feel when…/How competent do I feel when…* and assessing on a scale from 0% to 100% each statement from the questionnaires (for example, *Talk to a lecturer in private in class*, *Have a conversation with a friend who talked to you first*, *Ask a stranger a favour*), the students are able to evaluate their level of WTC, CA, and the characteristics of their SPCC. It is a very good introduction to the discussion on the psychological aspects of students' communicative behaviour. The questionnaires can be used in the further parts of the lesson: the students can compare their answers, comment on the results, and draw conclusions. Thanks to one conversation class devoted to these three aspects, it is highly probable that the students will understand better why some group members talk more while some others are afraid to take part in the discussion, why and how self-perception might influence the willingness to talk and the level of apprehension, and why communicative behaviour is context-dependent. The major prerequisite for the effectiveness of this class is the teacher's preparation as regards the above-mentioned concepts.

## 5.2 Sample tasks focusing on the development of communicative competence

The following tasks differ from those which students know from their primary and secondary education. First of all, they are very short, and they maximise student talking time. Secondly, they focus on skills rather than a topic: students practise discussing pictures, giving definitions, or providing arguments for and against. Finally, the activities aim at facilitating the development of the willingness to communicate and positive self-perception as well as lower the level of communication apprehension.

*Moving pictures*
Students work individually. They are each given one picture and 30 seconds to think of the themes connected with it that they would like to discuss. Next, they spend two minutes discussing their pictures; how-

ever, they do not have partners – they are supposed to talk about the pictures to themselves. After two minutes, every student passes his or her picture to the person sitting next to him or her, and the procedure starts again.

On the basis of the reflections provided by my students, it can be said that this activity is very difficult at the beginning, but with time, students become familiar with it. They say it is a good training of concentration and the ability to find many ideas under time pressure, which is very useful during the practical exam. Also, they mention a lower level of apprehension because they talk only to themselves, they can focus on the content, and they become more willing to communicate with partners later on.

*Last but not least*

This activity focuses on the ability to define various words. Students work in groups of three or four. They decide who is first, second, and third to provide definitions. The teacher gives the first word to define. The first person in each group starts defining it and continues for one minute (the timing can be changed, of course, depending on the difficulty of a word). When the time is up, the teacher says "stop," and the person stops talking immediately. The last word produced by the speaker is the new word to be defined by the second person in each group. In other words, from this time on, every person in every group will be defining a different word.

The quotation below comes from one of my classes and is a good example of this activity:

> Teacher: The first word to define is "happiness." You have one minute. When I say "stop," please, do not continue with your definition.
> Student 1: OK, so happiness is a state, ehm, of being really happy [laughter], ok, that's not a good definition, so happiness is a state when we are very, very, very pleased. We feel positive emotions and we are not worried. Ehm, what else, some biological processes take place in our body, endorphins transport some chemicals and makes our brain, ehm, relax, feel cosy [laughter], like after chocolate. Yes! Eating chocolate is happiness for many people, for me at least [laughter], oh yes, and for Kasia. For many people. Happiness is the opposite of sadness, I feel good, my **life**…
> Teacher: Stop! Person number 2, do you know which word you are supposed to define? All right, one minutes again, please, start!
> Student 2: Life is…

First of all, this activity is really funny for the students. Again, they train how to deal with stress and make up definitions faster than usual. It makes them more concentrated on the task and the content of what they are saying. Also, they try to come to terms with the fact that sometimes what they say might be funny for others and that it is fine to laugh at oneself. One of the groups told me that in regular pair/group work, they struggle for minutes, for example, with defining something, while others just wait and do not help them. Here, they have a time limit, and people who laugh at them will be in the same situation in one minute. This makes them feel relaxed and also teaches others empathy – I observed that after some time, they started helping each other when problems occurred.

*Conversation pitch*

In this activity, students use red and yellow cards, as in a football match, hence the title I created. Students work in pairs, discussing a given topic. The teacher needs to prepare a set of two cards for every student.

1. A student can use a yellow card when his or her partner: repeats him- or herself, repeats the same words, interrupts, goes off the topic, speaks too fast/slow/loud, uses phrases such as *I don't know…*, *what else…*, or *yes, yes, yes I agree…*
   The yellow card does not mean that the person who is warned must stop talking. It is only a signal that according to the other person there is something wrong with this conversation.
2. A student can use a red card when he or she wants to interrupt and say something, comment on what has been said, or give examples. Also, the students use red cards to avoid saying *yes, I agree with you* or *ok, but/ no, I don't agree with you*, which is very common. Instead, they just present an argument which supports or contradicts their partner's opinion.

When I created this activity and used it for the first time, I thought that the students would not be willing to use the cards. I was wrong because they used them very often, and with time, with my feedback, they became very alert to give yellow cards. The less willing-to-talk and more anxious students told me that finally they had a "tool" to interrupt and say something in the conversation with more proficient/ talkative students. Every teacher can modify this activity by adding different categories for the yellow and red card. I strongly recommend not overwhelming the students with too much information. We have to remember that they are supposed to focus on the content of their conversation and their mistakes and limitations, plus those of their partner. The rules for using the red/yellow card should be discussed beforehand:

the teacher should explain what is meant by each category and give examples. Only then can the students complete the task properly and effectively.

*With us or against us*
In this activity, we combine the ability to give arguments for/against with discussion over obvious topics. The idea for this activity was given by my students. They said that one of the most difficult tasks was to talk about general topics (for instance, food, health, hobby, cinema, sport, internet, or culture) and to provide obvious answers or give obvious arguments (for example, to a question Why is summer a nice season?). First, the students are provided with a general statement, such as:
VEGETABLES ARE HEALTHY.
SPORT MAKES YOU FIT.
LIFE WITHOUT THE INTERNET WOULD BE DIFFICULT.
EVERYBODY SHOULD HAVE A HOBBY.
Next, they think (for three minutes) individually of three arguments for this statement and three arguments against it. They work in groups of four and decide who is the first, second, third and fourth speaker. The first person starts with repeating the statement and giving one argument for it, introducing an example as a support of his or her argument and asking the second speaker a question connected with this argument. Person 2 answers the question and gives his or her argument for the statement. The activity continues in the same way as in the case of speaker 1. The timing for giving an argument, presenting an example, and asking a question is one minute. The next speaker also has one minute for his or her turn. The example below comes from one of my lessons:

> Speaker 1: Vegetables are healthy. They are healthy because they have lots of vitamins, for example carrot is rich in vitamin A. Kasia, do you think that supplements are so valuable that they can be used instead of vegetables?
> Speaker 2: No, definitely not. I think that natural vitamins are the best and we should eat them instead of medicines. Now, I agree that vegetables are healthy. People who eat more vegetables don't get flu in winter. For example, my mother, she eats five portions of vitamins every day and she is never sick in winter. Paweł, what do you do to stay healthy in winter?

This activity might look very artificial but it helps students to concentrate, focus on precise answers, and keep balance in the conversation

between presenting arguments, giving examples, and communicating with their partner. My students truly enjoy this activity since, as they claim, it helps them to gather their thoughts and, after some attempts, to become more natural when presenting very logical arguments.

*Keep calm and hook your audience*

Giving presentation is one of the most difficult of communication skills. The majority of people are stressed during their presentation, which negatively influences their performance. Also, not many people know how to attract their listeners' attention. Some say that presentation is an art, which is usually an inborn ability. Of course, some techniques can be trained, but it is a long process. One of the activities which can help the students to introduce their presentation is the one presented below.

The students are asked to work individually and prepare their presentation. In their three-minute presentation, they have to:
– introduce the topic by focusing audience attention;
– justify the choice of the topic;
– present a short outline of the presentation; and
– attract attention by asking a question connected with the topic.

Such an introduction is very clear for the audience since it is well-planned and it encourages the audience to listen and the speaker to talk. It is also beneficial for the speaker because he or she feels less anxious – a presentation with a framework gives the speaker some confidence. Below, I would like to show an example of an introduction to a presentation from my classes.

> I would like to tell you some details about car races. Probably you don't know that I used to take part in it for two years. I even won some cups. Of course, I competed only in Poland but for me it was a huge success. Since then I don't take part in races but I write some articles connected with it. I think I am quite experienced and I can teach you something. First, I will present a short history of car races in Poland. Next, I will show you some photos. Finally, I will tell you about some events I attended abroad. But first I have a question to all of you: have you got any idea why I resigned from car races?

First, the students were quite reluctant to prepare their presentations. It was clear that they did not like the task, probably because they were not trained well enough to do it. The second reason was anxiety, which accompanies public presentations. Even the strongest students admit that they feel anxious when they are supposed to talk to a group of

people. The students became more willing to complete the task when they heard that the presentation is supposed to be short and prepared according to a framework. They really liked this idea and even enjoyed the preparation. This activity shows that students can be trained in preparing presentations, but they need to take small steps and do it according to a framework.

## 6. Conclusions

This chapter offered some general guidelines for preparing and conducting FL conversation classes in the academic context of a modern languages philology department. It discussed anticipated problems and proposed possible solutions. Despite a common opinion to the contrary, conversation classes are difficult for both the teacher and students. Psychological (e.g., communication apprehension), administrative (e.g., group size), and organisational (e.g., the system of correction and assessment) factors influence the effectiveness of any practical English course, teaching communication in particular. Nevertheless, prepared and conducted well, conversation classes can become much more than just letting (usually most willing/proficient) students talk – they can fulfil the major aim, that is, to develop the willingness to communicate, to reduce apprehension, and to help students become effective communicators who have positive self-perception of their competence.

### Reflective questions

Q1: What are the main challenges a teacher may face when teaching FL conversation classes?
Q2: What are the main differences between speaking activities used in the primary, secondary, and tertiary education?

### Practical tasks

T1: Reflect upon the ways you were taught how to communicate in a foreign language at the primary and secondary schools, and later on at the university. Think about topics, coursebooks, and other didactic materials used, forms of assessment and feedback given,

and the profile of your class (that is, for example, size, heterogeneity, proficiency level, and size).

T2: Go back to Section 3 and analyse the proposed system of assessment by providing strong and weak points of it.

T3: Look for some examples of successful and effective presenters (for instance, YouTube, TED Talks) and discuss how they put into practice the framework from the *Keep calm and hook your audience* activity.

T4: Find in ELT literature three examples of speaking activities and discuss whether they could/could not be implemented in a FL conversation course in your university context. Justify your opinion.

## References

Canale, M., Swain, M. 1980. Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing. *Applied Linguistics*, *1*, 1–47.

Gałajda, D. 2017. *Communicative Behaviour of a Language Learner. Exploring Willingness to Communicate*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer.

Hall, E. 1966. *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Anchor Books.

Hymes, D.H. 1972. Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J. J. Gumperz and D. H. Hymes (eds.) *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, 35–71. Cambridge: Blackwell.

McCroskey, J.C. 1977. Classroom consequences of communication apprehension. *Communication Education* 26: 27–33.

McCroskey, J.C., McCroskey, L.L. 1988. Self-report as an approach to measuring communication competence. *Communication Research Reports* 5(2): 108–113.

McCroskey, J.C., Richmond, V.P. 1982. Communication apprehension and shyness: conceptual and operational distinctions. *Central States Speech Journal* 33: 458–468.

McCroskey, J.C., Richmond, V.P. 1987. Willingness to communicate. In J.C. McCroskey, J.A. Daly (eds.) *Personality and Interpersonal Communication*, 129–156. Beverly Hills: Sage.