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Main Strategies to Overcome Speaking Barriers for Ethnic Minorities (Case of Georgian Language)

ABSTRACT

The Paper discusses the challenges the learners of the Georgian language as a state language encounter and provides its solutions. The Paper reveals the different barriers the students face during the development of their speaking skills. The article offers practical activities to help language teachers, to motivate their students, to create a diverse learning environment where it will be possible to use different language registers.

Key words: *Identification of Language learners' problems; The role of the teacher; Practical activities.*

Development of the speaking skills for the learners is one of the tasks hard to achieve in the process of the learning of the language. The students, at various levels of this process, have to master and use various registers of the language. Besides, the learners in real life have to use the target language as in the planned, so in spontaneous communication situations, in the academic and working environment, at the routine level, which poses the pedagogues and the learners to the graver challenges as the students have to learn the relevant language for various

communication tasks and develop the skills of the proper use of this language. The pedagogues, to overcome these problems, need some special instruments and strategies, and as well as the skill to analyze the situation and ensure adequate, pedagogically expedient response thereto. The Paper aims to identify the challenges the learners of the Georgian language as an official language encounter, and to provide the solutions. The Paper reveals the barriers the students face during the development of their speaking skills. On the other hand, the Paper also identifies the complications the

pedagogues have to deal with deriving from the specification and socio-cultural aspects of the Georgian language. Besides, the paper aims to identify speaking barriers of the focus group, to analyze and offer language teachers methods, strategies and materials to improve speaking skills and offers the ways and recommendations for elimination of the hereof barriers. The main goal of the paper is also to reveal cultural and social peculiarities that negatively influence language usage. Research is conducted based on interviews and observations on the lessons by the authors. At that, the author of the Paper interviewed the non-Georgian lingual students of 4+1 program of Tbilisi State University. 10 out of 20 respondents are of Azerbaijani ethnicity, and the remaining 10 are the Armenian-lingual students. We have asked the questions to the respondents related to the barriers concerning the development of the speaking skills and their practical use, namely concerning the lingual, social, cultural, and learning practice-related aspects. Besides, the research included a brief experiment with the focal group aiming at conducting the dictate and detection of the degree of the perception of the text. One of the restrictions revealed during the research is as follows: due to the subjective and objective reasons beyond our dependence, the number of respondents

appeared less than desired. In addition, the respondents were trying to evade the answers to the sensitive questions or were trying to give the generalized answers. The hereof restrictions impede the provision and estimation of the wider picture. The first part of the Paper overviews the bibliography and describes the difficulties and barriers emerging during the process of learning the speech. It also provides the research outcome analysis, and the last part offers the ways and means to overcome the revealed barriers and provides certain lesson activities and exercises. As the scientific literature underlines, the “foreign Language-Learning Situation” is one of the key motivators upon learning the language (Dornyei and Cizer, 2006), implying the deficit of the direct link with the native speaker. The learner lacks verbal communication and hence, lacks motivation. As a result, the use of the target language is scarce (the target language is used only in the learning environment and process) (Alhmadi, 2014). Naturally, the practical exercises for the learner in the target language are available only in the class, and the skills of the learner are being developed only within the curriculum, then the lingual skills fail to be fully developed and the learner fails to use the target language in practice and real life, which

ultimately declines his/her motivation (Alhmad, 2014).

The scientific literature outlines several key barriers and factors, impeding the learner to develop his/her speaking skills, and to effectively apply these skills in real life. The Paper, on the one hand, analyzes the traditional division of the speaking barriers provided in the scientific literature, and on the other hand, offers the new approaches and provides the precise description of the difficulties the learner encounters upon the verbal use of the language. All in all, the research revealed several categories of barriers, namely: mental, socio-cultural, social, lingual, cognitive, and the problems related to the learning process. However, as expected, certain difficulties may be attributed to several of these categories at the same time, for instance, the fact that the learners of the language find it easier to establish the contact in the target language with their peers than with the representatives of the older generation or with the native speakers of higher competence, which may be considered as social, so the cultural phenomenon.

Mental restrictions:

As the scientific literature recognizes, the mental restriction is considered as one of the key barriers for the learners of the

language in enhancement and production of their speaking skills. The mental barriers are related to anxiety, which is recognized as one of such impediments upon speaking in a second or a foreign language. The link between the fear and the learning of the second language has been studied on the basis of the data of many languages. Along with the traditional objectives (personal peculiarities, public response, self-confidence etc.), we find the observation of Khan (2007) interesting, according to which, the more tense is the learning environment and the higher is the pressure the student is exposed to, the more unsuccessful is the learning process, and vice versa. In our turn, let us add that these factors have the special impact on the process of producing, speaking in the second/foreign language, which is the most spontaneous and does not allow pre-preparations and corrections but requires the level of the skills and knowledge at the extent when the learner is able to fluently express his/her position (holds the respective lexical-grammatical vocabulary) and/or easily finds the solution to overcome the lexical scarcity (substitutes the words with respective equivalent, expresses the context with description, and at least, uses the medium or the shared language).

There are abundant elucidations of the anxiety related to the second language,

including the explanation by researchers MacIntyre and Gardner, ensuring the best explanation of its nature during the learning of the second language: “the feeling of tension and apprehension especially associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and writing” (cited from: Elzbieta Krawczyk_Neifar, 2013). As to the anxiety emerging directly in the process of speaking, it has a negative impact on the speaking process, which originates from the lack of self-confidence, which most affects the speaking amongst all other lingual skills. On the example of the learners of French, the Price names four reasons for the fear, namely: „(1) fear of speaking the target language in front of their peers, (2) fear of making mistakes, (3) being laughed at by others, and (4) learners perceptions that their French language skills are weaker than those of other students“ (Price, 1991). Besides, anxiety may result from the dominant role of the teacher in the learning process and moreover, it impedes the student or the pupil to apprehend and perceive the topic according to the context (TOK, 2009: 85). Ultimately, anxiety and its consequences are reflected in the development of communicative competence. To sum up, the mental barrier is the factor unifies the cases as follows:

a) The fear of possible mistakes;

- b) The response of the others;
- c) The fear to be misunderstood or not understood;
- d) Unsuccessful experience;
- e) Lack of self-confidence;
- f) The mental barrier associated with self-expressing (including speaking in society).

The fear of mistakes is one of the most common factors amongst the students. In our research, other than the fear of mistakes, we have identified other reasons for mental discomfort, namely:

- a) The response of others: the respondents, when being interviewed, named the latent mockery, hinted comment with mockery, open mockery, ignorance and unsuccessful communication, termination of the conversation, corrections/remarks amongst undesirable responses.
- b) Fear to be misunderstood or not understood: improper delivery of the message or direct transfer from one language/culture to another language/culture is one of the preconditions for the failed communication, which for the target language or culture in certain speaking context, may not be relevant. The interviews revealed that the fear that your message will

be misunderstood is one of the barriers in the speaking process, and it is noteworthy that this fear is associated not only with the sensitive issues, the attempt to express own positions, which would be absolutely natural but even the elementary routine situations, for instance, the communication in the public transport or public areas (small talks);

- c) Unsuccessful experience: the past unsuccessful experience often takes a heavy toll on the learners under the lingual communication conditions during the use of the language. It is particularly evident in the same society or the identical situation, which impedes the learners in the use and enhancement of the speaking skills;
- d) Lack of self-confidence: lack of self-confidence is one of the strongest mental barriers serving as the restrictive factors not only in the language but in any activity of the person. The interviews revealed that certain part of the respondents held the relevant lexical vocabulary and due skills necessary for certain speaking situations, though failed to establish the communication in practice. Some respondents also

noted about their difficulty to ask a question to the teachers / addressee / interlocutor, and besides, they often use the native or medium language during the speech or stop speaking at all, asking a friend for help or resorting to the electronic translation systems;

- e) The mental barrier associated with self-expression (including the speaking in the society): naturally, this barrier is not determined by the use of the second language solely but can cause the problems in any social situation, though, as the respondents noted in an in-depth interview, this problem is particularly acute during the lingual communication, namely, when speaking in a foreign/second language as already existing discomfort is aggravated with the lingual problems.

Cultural and social barriers:

The scientific literature notes that the learning of the language – it implies not only to master the standalone lexical, grammatical, or other information but it is to acquire the symbolic elements of various ethnolinguistic societies (Gardner, 1979), which is associated to the cultural attainment of a certain society. One of the

conceptual mistakes often made by the theoreticians of the second language for years was that they have been considering the language as a code when mastering this code (mostly, studying the grammar rules and certain social context, it is “built-in”) – one language shall without a doubt (however, in a complicated manner) transmits into the second language (Kramsch, 1993). The linguistic data is accompanied with the cultural background (NSFLEP, 1996), and thus, the cultural competence implies the adoption of the agreements, habits, faiths and imaginations, and the way of thinking within any of the cultures by the learner (Gochitashvili, 2011).

The Paper analyzes the impediments emerging during learning the speaking, which amongst the interviewed respondents, are associated with the cultural barriers and the direct transfer from the native culture to the target culture:

- a) In this regard, one of the important barriers related to the aspects of the culture is the difference between the cultures, values, and traditions / norms and only linguistic knowledge is not enough for the speaker to establish the fluent communication and adequately use his/her due knowledge. It requires the speaker acquisition of the

custom behavior norms characteristic for a certain language, which are in close connection with culture. Besides, non-verbal communicative signs which are of no less importance and are conditioned with the respective cultural peculiarities and especially during the speech, are ignored in the learning process. And the absence of such knowledge in real-life suspends and impedes successful communication. It is noteworthy that 55% of the respondents name these factors as the barriers for verbal communication;

- b) The poor socio-cultural competence and absence of the proper knowledge: as noted, knowing the language means the knowledge related to BIG Culture and everyday culture. 85% of the respondents note that they acquire certain knowledge during the learning process, the instructors provide information about history and traditions of Georgia at the fifth level but as to the knowledge concerning the respective behavioral rules in the target social strata, 80% of the respondents note that such activities during the learning process are less provided;

- c) Lack of tolerance to other culture: the everyday topic for the people to discuss mostly concerns the cultural sphere and so, if a person lacks the due knowledge and commitment to admit or ask about the issues of the different culture, naturally, he/she will find it difficult to establish the long-term and effective communication with the representatives of the target culture. As the surveys revealed, 65% of the respondents demonstrated no interest in the target culture;
- d) Barriers due to the religious and the related value differences: just 20% of the respondents consider that the different religion serves as one of the impeding factors for verbal communication;
- e) The interviews revealed that the social factors also pose the barriers to the learners in the development of the speaking skills, for instance, the students (45%) state that they speak in Georgian in a more fluent manner with their peers than with the lecturers, which is conditioned with the social norms. As it seems, the relationship for the students appears more difficult with elderly people or persons with higher social qualifications.

The linguistic barrier:

Learning the language is of a complex nature and covers the development of various competences. The absence of knowledge of the grammar or the scarcity of the vocabulary may serve as the impediment factors upon the use of the speaking skills in practice. The part of the respondents (80%) believe that the lack of grammar knowledge and namely the problems related to the specific nature of Georgian language (phonetic system, case system, complicated verbs etc.) constitute the barriers in speaking the Georgian language. The part of the students (75%) encounters the problem of the absence of the speaking, routine vocabulary. They fluently acquire the texts provided at the lecture but fail to use the daily communicative lingual forms. And the role of the extra-linguistic factors in this regard is of high interest. The part of the students (60%) abstains from the communication as they feel inconvenient due to their accent. And finally, the scarcity of the respective vocabulary units of the routine language is yet another impediment for the students.

Cognitive barrier:

„English learning process of minority preparatory students, and interrelated activity of both the newly-learned English knowledge and their original related

knowledge in the cognitive structure, is to form new English cognitive structure or expand the original structure“ (Li1, Ma1, Wang, 2013: 267). According to the authors, learning the English language in this regard is not the cognitive process solely but is associated with the emotions, determination, mental and environmental challenges. Some students achieve the ability to manage the learning process at their own and hence, they are exposed to the impact of their own cognitive and non-cognitive factors (Ibidem, 268). Naturally, the learner until he/she achieves the high level of fluency finds it difficult to simultaneously think and speak in a target language. And until it becomes an automatic process, the learner thinks in a native language and translates into the target language when speaking, and thus, it affects the pace and efficiency of communication. On the other hand, processing the acquired information requires certain skills and experience and in this case, as well, the learners resort to the translation methods. Yet another cognitive barrier is an interruption in perception upon the excessive flow of information in the second language/extensive use of the language. Within the survey, we have conducted a brief experiment when one and the same information was provided to the homogenous group of the students in the

form of dictation in and uninterrupted and fragmented manner, and then asked the open questions about the text. The survey revealed that 75% of the students perceived 85% of the fragmented information in an adequate way, while the index during the uninterrupted provision of information is lower (40%). 85% of the respondents note that they think in a native language and then translate into Georgian, and thinking in a native language and necessity of translation in view of communication impedes the speaking process.

The barriers related to the teaching process:

The approach to the teaching language influenced by the Soviet educational system in Georgia has been remaining unchanged for decades and was based mostly on the translational and grammar methods. Despite the recent significant changes to the educational system in methodological and teaching terms, the result was of not a desired quality still. First of all, it is noteworthy that the significant part of the pedagogues represents the old-school generation, unable to acquire the new communication approaches and to establish the new methods in the teaching process, while the part of the pedagogues considers the modern approaches as ineffective. As a result, the teaching process is based on the accumulation of knowledge

instead of the critical pedagogical methods and the use of knowledge. The teachers mostly make the learners learn the ready-made texts than facilitating the independent development of their own texts and the use of certain phrases to independently create the speaking situation. Correspondingly, the alumni lack the speaking skills and fail to establish effective verbal communication in a daily routine situation. In this regard, the Paper analyzes yet another barrier related to the development of the speaking skills, namely the difficulties existing in the teaching process. The surveys revealed the factors as follows:

1. Less time is spent on the development of speaking skills;
2. The teaching process is oriented to the grammar and vocabulary and fails to envisage the development of the socio-cultural competences;
3. The teaching is oriented to memorization and is not used in practice;
4. The text-book related problems often emerge: artificial texts; lingual forms and structures/phrases worthless for the practical needs;
5. The excessive emphasis on the mistakes and the lack of positive feedback.

The observations revealed that the integration of speaking activities is one of

the most acute problems during the teaching process. On the one hand, it requires the vast experience of the teacher, creativity and tolerance, and on the other hand, the knowledge of such activities. As a rule, the speaking activities and the tasks in Georgian reality are less represented and thus, the teachers have to independently create and develop the tasks taking the interests, background knowledge, age and commitment of the pupils into account. Besides, each activity, deriving from the specification of the target group, shall be numerously revised, which requires from the teachers the maximal mobilization, respective skills and knowledge. Thus, speaking activities are less integrated into the lessons. Most of the students (70%) consider that time spent by the teachers for the development of the speaking skills is not enough, and unfortunately, some of the students are unable to be engaged in the speaking activities. In the in-depth interviews, the students state that they want the speaking activities to be more diverse and longer to allow all the learners to participate in this process.

The general approach to teaching language is another significant impeding factor. As noted, the teaching process is mostly oriented to the accumulation of knowledge, offering the ready-made formulas and clichés, memorization of the

texts. However, students lack the skill to adequately use their knowledge and establish effective communication. It is particularly reflected in the fact that the students lack the developed socio-cultural competences and they resort to the direct cultural transfer during the communication from the native language and culture, which poses a significant barrier for them. 65% of the respondents note that they encounter difficulties in speaking in public areas as they are not aware of how to behave and what to say. 75% of the respondents establish fluent elementary communication, though they fail to engage in a serious conversation and express their positions. And only 25% of the respondents are able to fluently take part in the conversation.

Another impeding factor is associated with the teaching methods. As noted, teaching oriented to memorization is one of the approved methods of the teaching process, though it is hard to use it in practice as the students lack the due experience, skills for making the decision respective to the communication situation in a spontaneous manner. As a rule, the students on the one hand are well aware of ready-made lingual formulas but on the other hand, they fail to properly and adequately use these formulas in the speech. 85% of the respondents state that

they easily acquire the material in the class and the lingual means but fail to use them in the routine life as their knowledge is limited. 70% of the respondents think that they use the familiar lingual formulas only in a familiar communicative environment and if the topic is changed, they find it hard to participate in the communication. Only 20% of the respondents believe that they successfully use the knowledge acquired during the teaching process, however, in this case, the level of their knowledge is relatively higher and they manifest the long experience of the use of the language. As a result, the pupils spend all their vigor on memorization of the material, while they spend less time on analysis, estimation and realization of the information. Correspondingly, they fail to develop critical thinking, which ultimately, constitutes one of the necessary preconditions for learning the language taking the critical pedagogical approaches into account.

As to the problems related to the teaching material, we shall first of all touch the principles of development of the texts. In this regard, we would outline the artificial texts. The texts or the parts of the texts by the authors in most of the textbooks are borrowed from various ready texts. It is as well noteworthy that the ready texts mostly are not adapted to and do not

comply with the lingual level of the learners. As to the texts developed by the authors, they provide many such lingual formulas which are not natural or are less used in routine life. Besides, unlike other greater international languages, there are not sufficient modern electronic auxiliary academic material and means for the learners of the Georgian language, and the scarcity of the audio material is acutest. There is another problem that should be urgently addressed – it is the excessive emphasis on the mistakes and the lack of positive feedback. The language instructors, when teaching the speech, often interrupt the speech of the students with their remarks and the comments. The teachers stress the mistakes in the very process of speaking, which as observed, is not effective for the pupil. Upon such feedback, the pupil cannot acquire the material due to the stress, and fearing the mistakes, abstains from participation in the speaking activities. 60% of the respondents believe such interference to impede their learning, while 25% of them consider it an impediment only in a partial way, and only 15% of the respondents ignore direct interference of the teachers.

As the analysis revealed, the learners encounter various barriers that can be addressed with the positive and balanced interference of the teachers, mostly

expressed in the preparatory works at the pre-session phase of speaking. It is as well paramount for the teacher to give the proper direction to the pupils during the process, though the learners still remain the main “actors”. With the proper feedback, strategies and activities, these challenges can be gradually overcome and the learners can develop their speaking skills. Triggering the motivation of the student serves as an essential factor for the development of the speaking skills (as in general, so in the teaching process). Reynolds outlines 2 types of motivation: 1) the first type of motivation (Intensity of Motivation) envisages the efforts the students direct to learn the second language; and 2) the second type of motivation is associated with the objectives of learning the second language. These motivations shall effectively substitute each other when teaching the language (Reynolds, 1991). Hence, the teaching process shall be planned in the manner to motivate the student in demonstrating his/her knowledge in practice and easily overcome all the barriers while speaking in a target language. This part of the Paper provides the ways and the recommendations related to overcoming the barriers emerging in the process of learning to speak. The activities can be used

by the teachers for planning and conducting the lectures.

As noted, the fear to make possible mistakes is one of the strongest impeding factors during the speaking. The teacher shall at the same time convince the learner that the mistake is a natural part of learning and using the foreign language and shall offer the activities as follows: the preparatory activities are of utmost importance prior the speaking session as it provides the lexical-phraseological knowledge, knowledge of the context of the material and facilitates overcoming the difficulties during the speaking.

1. The teacher asks the class to recall the lexical-phraseological units related to the lesson (during the speaking block) and share them. The class may be divided into the groups for the competition;
2. The teacher, by using the familiar lexical units, provides the background knowledge regarding the topic;
3. The teacher, prior to the speaking session, introduces the high-frequency lexical units for the students to use during the speaking process, offers the synonyms and antonyms of these units, and the most common collocations and ready phrases. At the same time, the

teacher asks the students to recall what they already know;

4. The teacher substitutes the new lexical units with the synonym and antonym units in the context and asks the students to detect them.

The teacher can resort to the activities as follows for identification of the mistakes:

1. The teacher preliminarily prepares the cards with the correct and incorrect forms and/or context-related information. The students, abstaining from speaking out of fear of the mistakes, play the role of the assistant to the teacher. They have the correct answers (provided on the backside of the card) and read the cards to the class for identification. These students thus realize that everyone can make a mistake and it is not the reason for silence;
2. One of the important preconditions for the teacher and the students to adhere to is that they shall abstain from correcting the mistakes to the speaker during the speaking. The teacher should better discuss the general mistakes, make a general analysis of the mistakes after the speaking session without indicating to certain students. As we have observed, it is effective to categorize the mistakes into the

clusters (phonetic, lexical, grammar etc.) and discuss them. We need to remember that we shall never interfere with the speaker but the teacher can ask the student back in a corrected form/version. In general, the teacher can also repeat the correct form in the form of the feedback, for instance, to conduct the dialogue in the following manner:

Student: it is warm on spring;

Teacher: it is warm in spring, isn't it? Correct, it is warm in spring indeed.

It will as well be effective for the development of the speaking skills at the lesson to apply the activities as follows:

1. Our working practice reveals that summarizing is one of the most productive activities for the development of speaking skills. The teacher asks the students to briefly tell the story/provide the information heard at the lesson. Upon estimation, the teacher considers the number of the key aspects emphasized by the student;
2. Discussion is a widely approved activity as in the educational process in general, so for the development of the speaking skills.

As a rule, the discussion shall follow after the content-based lesson. To prevent the chaotic development of the discussion, the teacher shall give direction to the students. The discussion may be held around the topics as follows: 1. To express the critical attitude towards the content; 2. To discuss the admissible aspects of the content; and 3. To share own opinions regarding the issue etc.

3. The interview – the students “hold the interview” around the topic. The teacher gives time to the students to think and then the students ask the questions to each other. The questions shall about the actual information, as well as of the analytical nature. It would be preferable for the students to abstain from asking the questions requiring the simple answers like “yes” or “no”;
4. Add the missing information – it is one of the most effective activities for the development of speaking skills. After the content is introduced, the student tells the story/provides information heard and omits its certain part. The class listens and completes the information. The activity may be

held in a group. Each member of the group omits different parts of information.

Unsuccessful experience – it implies that the learner has encountered communication failure during the speaking process in the near or far past and it serves a significant barrier to forget or overcome it. In some cases, communication has been held in the class, or it was the real-life communication. As a result, the learner prefers to stop or abstain from communication to prevent his/her past failure. In such a case, the teacher shall create the respective conditions for the student to make him/her speak using the activities as follows:

1. Assign the simple task in the form of the group exercise without the obligation to introduce the work to the class at the first stage. Thus, the teacher plays the role of the facilitator and ensures minimal intervention in case of necessity;
2. Designate the student, abstaining from communication, as an observer for the group exercise and ask him/her to estimate and resume the work after it is finished;
3. At the high level of learning the language, the students may be

assigned to read the text and then to discuss it in the group and express their positions. The precondition for it may be the written consideration of the problem on the online forum. During consideration, the teacher shall ask the questions. At the beginning of this activity, the teacher shall ask the yes/no ended questions and then gradually move to the open-ended questions;

4. The class theatre – we offer to the students the brief but memorable roles which will play a positive impact on their personal mood.

The survey revealed that improvement of development on the upcoming levels requires a longer time compared to the development of the receptive skills. It requires modernization of the material and the teaching strategies and their integration in the lesson. Despite that the teacher plays the key role, it is paramount to trigger the motivation of the students and to allow them to speak about various topics and issues in various modeled communication situations. The efficiency of this process requires balanced, permanent feedback oriented not only to the identification of the mistakes but to motivation and encouragement of the students.

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