RHETORIC IN LESSONS OF ENGLISH IN VOCATIONAL PROGRAMMES OF UPPER SECONDARY EDUCATION

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Introduction

How English is taught in Slovene secondary schools is determined by three major factors: on one side there are educational legislation, regulations and directives, knowledge standards, attainment targets, educational goals, which are determined on the national level, on the other side there is usually a very heterogeneous group of students of a particular class, each student contributing to the classroom climate his/her unique abilities, knowledge, experiences and preferences. On the third side, as a kind of a mediator between the requirements of both, stands a teacher with his/her professional education, experiences, personal traits and values. Lesson planning and teaching are undoubtedly very demanding processes for everyone involved. They require constant adjustment and do not allow unchangeable, final answers to the questions that arise in the process.

This paper focuses on the value of rhetorical knowledge for the students and presents some of the more effective methods developed to present the students the rhetorical concepts and to develop their speaking skills as well as their social competences. It comments on the presented approach and offers some suggestions for effective teaching in such classes.

English in upper secondary vocational education

The project focused on the students of secondary vocational programmes of Salesman and Custodian. These programmes offer three years of

full-time education to students aged 15 to 17/18 years. The curriculum for the first programme includes 350 (two years and a half of four periods per week) and the second 208 (three years of two periods per week) hours of a foreign language. The project focused on this particular group of students to test the hypothesis that the teaching and implementation of rhetoric in a foreign language teaching and learning offers mechanisms which can alleviate some of the problems that arise in these classes.

In Velenje, the students who choose these two programmes are quite heterogeneous. Many a student is two years older than the majority of his/her peers because s/he has chosen this programme after s/he had not been successful in a four-year technical programme. The students also come from a wide range of social backgrounds. Many students in these two programmes are the first generation born in Slovenia to the labour immigrants who arrived in Slovenia in the 1970's and 1980's. Some of them came with their parents as war refugees in the 1990's. These students bring different cultural background and experiences to the classroom, which is then reflected in the classroom climate.

The foreign language proficiency of the majority of students attending these programmes is average or less than average (according to the primary school knowledge standards). They come with more or less negative past learning experiences and with a rather poor self-image and self-esteem. Often they want to assert themselves in front of their peers in ways which are not connected with knowledge or values they are being taught in school. Teaching in such classes can be very difficult and stressful for the teacher because s/he has to deal daily with discipline violations, work with often unmotivated students and, of course, stand his/her ground against the natural rebelling of the teenagers. The existing disciplinary measures are in most cases ineffective to maintain discipline and order daily and to keep interpersonal interactions at an adequate level.

In this situation a teacher is obliged to act according to the national educational legislation, regulations and recommendations. The Law on the Vocational and Technical Education states that such education should among other things:

- provide the students with the internationally comparable level of knowledge, skills and professional competences necessary to practice a profession and for lifelong learning,
- develop independent, critical judgement and responsible acting,
- support awareness of an individual's integrity,

- educate for responsible maintenance of peace and tolerant, peaceful and respectful co-existence with the others,
- develop and preserve one's own cultural traditions and inform about other cultures and civilisations,
- develop awareness of the rights and responsibilities of an individual and a citizen. (Uradni list 12/1996)

For the curricular subject of English there are two national Catalogues for secondary vocational schools, specifying the educational goals and didactic recommendations. One is from 1998 and the most recent one from 2003. This one is still in its development phase and anticipates the future programme reform.

The most recent catalogue presents more concrete and useful goals. Education should stimulate and develop those competences which prepare the students to be successful in their personal as well as professional life. An integral approach to language is emphasised and a communication model is recommended. This model is based on the following principles:

- foreign language proficiency enables and encourages interpersonal communication,
- communication is efficient if the speaker is linguistically and strategically independent, and
- a precondition for effective learning is the motivation to learn and use the language.

In the communication model teaching is focused on a student. A student and a teacher should equally contribute to a relaxed interaction; a teacher should present his/her knowledge to students and encourage them to achieve a higher level of independence, and students should actively participate in this process according to their abilities. The social integration of students is recommended by implementing activities such as team or project work. The catalogue recommends teachers to encourage students to take the initiatives, be innovative and to solve the problems of their environment. By developing these competences, students increase their awareness of the professional responsibility. Lesson plans and selected learning contents are recommended to be cross-curricular.

After finishing the vocational programme, students should acquire the following key competences:

- understanding the general message in simple and clearly formed oral or written texts and understanding the vocabulary from the most basic areas of personal and professional life,
- communicate about simple, everyday activities,
- speaking about him/herself, the others, various objects, living conditions and current activities,
- writing simple, short texts which are used in different circumstances (e.g. a warning, SMS, fax, a short personal letter, etc.)

The goals presented above are quite clear and directed not only towards increasing the integral linguistic proficiency and strategic competences in communication. They also develop those personal traits which will enable them to become productive members of society. It is difficult to disagree with that. However, when a teacher wants to implement this in his/her teaching practice, problems arise.

The catalogues presuppose an ideal situation in the classroom where students do not behave disturbingly and are highly motivated. A teacher works with a manageable group of students so s/he can monitor the achievements and progress of each one of them. In reality the students in vocational programmes are very difficult to motivate for work and large classes do not allow high-quality work due to the constant and numerous disruptions.

For bridging this discrepancy between the ideal and realistic situation, a teacher can rely only on his/her professional knowledge and autonomy to find (more or less successfully) the ways to lead students towards the presented teaching goals. In the following sections the teaching approach which was designed for the students of vocational programmes for the subject of English will be outlined. At the core of the approach was rhetoric.

Rhetoric in the classroom

The concept of rhetoric has shifted widely during its 2500 history. It this paper it is understood in the framework of its classical tradition as the art, technique or practice of persuasion through the use of language (cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, 1994-2002).

»Rhetoric in the sense of the means and techniques of persuasion appears in all societies. Every communication involves rhetoric. The speaker or the writer has an objective (-s) and rhetoric defines the ways of achieving those objectives within the framework of a given culture«.

(Kennedy, 2001: 19)

Following the classical tradition, rhetoric in this paper is approached through the five canons of classical rhetoric (*inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria*, and *pronuntiatio*) and the three modes of persuasion (ethos, pathos and logos).

Teaching rhetoric prepares an individual for his/her civil role. In a democratic society the conflicts between different ideas should be resolved verbally. The efficient use of arguments is in today's society the only possible, or rather the only sensible alternative to violence.(Perelman 1984: 199) Rhetorical knowledge should empower an individual to make a stand for his/her ideas, rights and interests. It should also enable him/her to recognise and defend himself/herself from manipulations and illogical argumentation.

Rhetorical knowledge is also very valuable in one's professional life. Conflicts of ideas and interests are also part of the very competitive global market. Concise use of language for expressing ideas and supporting them by arguments, practising the art of persuasion, advising to do or not to do something, explaining, being experienced in delivering speeches in public, all these are factors which decide if an individual will be professionally successful or not.

Nowadays, when the value of rhetorical knowledge is being increasingly recognised, rhetoric is re-entering general education in the form of selective subjects, debate clubs and the use of debate techniques in primary and secondary schools. Rhetoric can be very easily and organically incorporated into many of the existing curricular subjects. Since rhetoric does not limit the speakers by any particular content, it transcends the framework of a single discipline, and can be equally effectively incorporated into the lessons of a single discipline as well as the interdisciplinary lessons.

Rhetoric is not usually associated with the population of 15 to 17/18 year-olds attending vocational programmes. However, these students, being at a critical period of their personal development and in many cases at the last phase of their regular education, need to be offered some of the rhetorical knowledge within their upper secondary education too. Rhetoric does not only have positive effects on their personal

development, but also, as I will try to show in the following sections, on their learning of a foreign language.

The developed approach

It may seem at first glance that effective learning of rhetorical topics requires a good language proficiency of students and that they need to show interest for theoretical contents. The majority of students in vocational programmes lack both of these aspects. However, experience from teaching practice suggests that just the basic knowledge of a foreign language and the understanding of the rudimentary rhetorical concepts are enough to create a firm foundation for effective further study of rhetorical topics in the following years of the programme.

It is very important to start implementing the approach as soon as possible. In the first year, when the students' language proficiency is at the lowest point, the most emphasis is put on the acquisition of the basic vocabulary and grammar. At this phase, a lot is achieved already if the students adopt the new methods of work and establish tolerant and safe working environment. Later, when their speaking skills improve, the emphasis can shift gradually from very guided activities in which they mostly learn from given oral or written texts, to increasingly independent activities in which they learn by using the acquired vocabulary and structures creatively.

When selecting the areas of rhetoric for the classroom presentation, the primary criterion was their usefulness for the students in concrete life situations. The programmes Salesman and Custodian prepare the students to work in the service industry. Because the speaking and listening skills are here of primary importance (Catalogue, 1998), we focused mostly on these two skills.

The theoretical part of rhetoric was mostly taught in the form of a group work by means of illustrative examples. The groups were given specific tasks and their results were then commented on in the classroom. In these (guided) discussions the students were able to learn the basic principles of effective use of language and at the same time practise the art of persuasion and using arguments for evaluation of their products.

In this way they learned, for example about the importance and influence of the order of the text parts, the amount of and quality of information in the text, the type of addressee, the emotional elements

in the text, the importance of memorising, etc. They collected and shared the examples of good style from the songs, internet chats, movies, etc. Some of the rhetorical concepts were merely touched upon, some were devoted to several lessons. The amount of time and depth of the presentation depended on the student's interest and motivation for work and their active participation. In lower grades the learning content was mostly limited to the basics, in upper grades the students could already be given more complex tasks.

However, learning about the basic rhetorical concepts was not the primary goal – more time was spent and more emphasis was put on the practical use of language. This was carried out in the form of discussions and oral presentations. Since the students needed a clear goal, the purpose to their activities, two main goals were set already at the beginning of the school year:

1. to learn how to communicate with others; e.g. to have a conversation, make arrangements, explain, persuade, advise in pairs or groups, mostly in the form of discussions, and

2. to prepare a two-minute oral presentation on the topic of their choice.

Their participation in the discussions was assessed only with the student's agreement, the two-minute oral presentation was assessed for all the students.

Discussions were mostly conducted in three or four groups of students. Groups of students were solving problems or trying to reach an agreement on various issues. All discussions had a clear goal (e.g. to reach an agreement, find a solution, make a decision) and a time limit. Reaching a goal was less important than the process of discussing. When the students were still learning about this form of work, it was better if only one group was active at a time and the rest of the class would listen and later give their comments. Later, especially in higher grades in more disciplined classes, it was possible for groups to work simultaneously.

During the group work the students had to adapt to each other and respect everyone's freedom of speech. Personally offensive language was not allowed and was considered to be a sign of the speaker's argumentative weakness or a lack of relevant arguments. The groups who very successfully finished the task were rewarded, and those who were unsuccessful due to inactivity or a lack of discipline were punished. Reward and punishment were in most cases symbolical and were defined and agreed upon

beforehand by the students. This carrot-and-stick approach proved to be a strong motivational factor for the students and it often brought humorous effect to the lessons.

The topics were mostly chosen a few lessons before they were discussed. In this way it was possible for the students who wished to be assessed in the discussions to prepare for them. Among other topics, we discussed the relationship between money and happiness, (un-)attractiveness of stardom, the ethics of spending money on luxurious items, the influence of pornography on the teenagers. We searched solutions to the problem of inactivity of the students during the lessons, the problem of eating healthy food in our hectic world (an excellent opportunity to sort out personal priorities and practise modal verbs, adjectives and sentence connectives). We tried to reach a decision about the most efficient management of waste paper, an effective management of the personal free time and the time for school work. In the form of role-play the students had to persuade the customer about the quality of their products or argue for and against eating (un-)healthy food.

The student's two-minute oral presentation took place in the latter part of the school year. More complex topics could be presented by more than one student. The students were given an opportunity to enrich their vocabulary from the field which they found particularly interesting and to use and show the knowledge acquired during the school year(-s). As a preparation for those presentations, some students had test presentations during the first part of the school year. Those presentations were commented on in the classroom and if necessary, the students were offered individual consultations for their projects.

They learned how to search for and select information, and organise it effectively in their presentations. The grade depended on the effort put into the project and the quality of their oral presentation. The students were informed about the assessment criteria beforehand.

Evaluation of the presented approach

The presented approach can be assessed as promising for at least three reasons: firstly: the feedback from the students in connection with this approach has been mostly positive; secondly: it is in accordance with the current pedagogical and didactic recommendations, and thirdly: the assessed teaching results (according to the same knowledge standards)

have improved in classes where the presented approach was implemented. However, no definite conclusions can be offered yet because the number of students that have been included in the project is too small (65 students) and the approach is still being developed.

Among the used methods of work and selected topics, some proved to be more efficient than others. The more efficient ones followed the following three principles: usefulness (what will the students need later in their lives), concreteness (inductive approach) and shortness (less is more). Those three principles proved to be essential for the increase of the students' motivation in the secondary vocational programmes. These students often have an aversion to the teaching contents which will not be useful in their lives or the practical application of which is not immediately evident. They also dislike the contents which remain (only or for too long) on theoretical level and finally, the contents which require a long period of intense concentration to be understood or remembered.

The majority of the students looked forward to the rhetorical lessons of English because they were more active. The student's active participation is encouraged also in the current pedagogical and didactic publications:

> »Active learning is every activity in which the students work at a certain level of independence and organisational control, guidance and direction. ... It is intellectually stimulating and more effective for sustaining the students' motivation and interest. [It is also] more effective for acquiring many important skills (work organisation, mutual co-operation, exchanging opinions). The students like such activities because they are less intimidating than the activities where the teacher speaks and stimulate a more positive attitude to the student's individual role as well as to the subject«.
>
> <div align="right">(Kiriacou, 1997:.54)</div>

Powell and Solity emphasise that students should be educated to take responsibility for their actions, acquire a critical and independent way of thinking in order to become active participants in the selection of the learning contents (Powell and Solity 1993: 16).

In the presented approach it was the students who mostly chose the topics and thereby their interest increased as well. This observation can be supported also by the recent didactic publications. Adamič (2005: 27-28) argues that the choice of the learning contents and their form always receives problematic extensions when the educational subjects become tied with the disciplines. Then the syllabus is too subjected to the narrow interests of a particular discipline and too little consideration is devoted to the students' interests, which need to be developed, and the requirements of society. Human interests have an incredible motivational

potential for learning and a substantial influence on the quality of the learned contents.

As the work in the classroom was carried out mostly in groups and pairs, co-operation and empathy increased among the students, they developed tolerance towards the different and trust towards the teacher and the peers. Friendships among some of the students became closer. This pattern of relationships among the students enabled different individuals not to feel alienated if they wanted to preserve their identity. The discipline consequently improved, because, as Strike (2005: 23) points out, the main enemy of discipline is alienation. Integration is its cure.

It may seem at the first sight that the presented approach is trying to sell already seen things under a new name. After all, pair-work and group-work have been around in the foreign language teaching for a long time. However, there is a substantial difference here. Traditional pair-work seldom transcended the framework of the more or less mechanical use of the taught conversational pattern. The same pattern was used several times with minor modifications. In a more traditional implementation of group-work the emphasis was put on the result and not so much on the process. Because communication did not arise from an authentic need, and because it was easier to arrive at the result by using the mother tongue, it was difficult to motivate the students to work in groups in a foreign language.

The essential difference in the presented approach is in the fact that the communication is approached in a comprehensive way, it is thematically open and theoretically systemised. It sets up a more authentic and complex communicative situation where one needs to consider:

- what it is that you want to say,
- how you succeed in saying what you mean,
- what the addressee expects you to say,
- what the addressee thinks you will say and
- what the addressee thinks was your purpose.

These are the challenges our students will need to respond to when they communicate in a foreign language as well as in their mother tongue. It is as unrealistic to expect that the students in vocational programmes can completely master these complex tasks as it is unrealistic to expect that they cannot do it at all.

The presented approach to the teaching of English brings also problems and opens up new questions that require more research. One

of the problematic areas is the right balance between the focus on the communication and the focus on the language in the narrow sense (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.). This aspect of a foreign language still needs to be taught and practised because it enables effective communication. More traditional teaching methods seem more effective in this respect. Experience gained in the project suggests that the right balance depends primarily on the particular structure of the students in a class and their level of English. In general, it seemed most effective to dedicate approximately one third of the lessons to the rhetorical workshops.

Another problem is related to the individual character traits of the students and their level of English. The presented approach is very stimulating for extroverted and linguistically proficient students. For the introverted students and/or those who are linguistically extremely weak (according to my experience a very small proportion of students), the communicative approach can be quite intimidating, especially in the beginning. They often do not want or do not know how to participate in those activities and therefore start feeling excluded, which brings more problems with discipline. With these students it is necessary to work on the emotionally safe working environment, the development of trust and positive self-esteem. With the students involved in the project it sometimes proved to be effective to appoint a peer translator for the ones who wanted to participate in discussions but were not able to due to their weak English.

Conclusion

Kroflič (2005: 10) emphasises that the goal of education is not only the acquisition of new theoretical knowledge. It is equally important for the teacher to help the young to develop mechanisms to create an appropriate culture of inter-relationships in the classroom and in school, so that they can deepen their trust, create new friendship ties with the peers, develop a personal capacity to empathise with those who are different, develop appropriate forms of co-operation and healthy competitiveness. The presented approach effectively addresses these issues as well. It is in concordance with the Slovene educational legislation, the national standards of knowledge for the subject of English and the findings of many contemporary didactic and pedagogical experts. The main advantages of the presented approach can be summarised in the following points:

- since it is based on the active participation of the student, it increases their motivation and thereby their learning results,
- it integrally develops the student's speaking skills in quite realistic situations which they will encounter later in their lives,
- it develops strategies of co-operation and tolerance to the different,
- it develops the student's sense of responsibility for themselves and the others,
- it improves the discipline in the classroom.

The presented experiences and findings are not intended to represent the final answers or the universal recipe for the teachers of English in three-year vocational programmes of secondary education. The aim of this paper is to highlight for the general and scholarly public the substantial educational potential of rhetoric for the subject of English in the upper secondary vocational education as well as for school education in general. In spite of this potential, rhetoric is still not generally included into the system of undergraduate education of teachers.

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