

4. Three key aspects of current didactics in orality

The area of orality is a huge field with an extensive literature in various languages and traditions. The different traditions are reflected, for instance, in the significance which target areas, such as “democratic discussions in the class council” or “expressive reciting of poems” have or had in various cultures. In the following, we are limiting the focus on a few aspects about which there might be a consensus in the didactics of orality among the western and northern European immigration countries, and which are also of interest to the practice of HLT.

a) Goals and fields of work in the area of orality

The overarching goal of educational promotion in the areas of listening and speaking is the strengthening of students’ communicative competence to act. This occurs in regular curriculum classes as well as in HLT in age-appropriate fashion and in observation of the additional goal to lead students to an increasingly competent use of the standard language.

In oral language production, i. e., speaking, a distinction is made between dialogical and monological forms with distinctive objectives and working methods. The entire approach to teaching speech communication relates to dialogical forms. Its goal is adequate conduct in dialogs, conflict discussions, social role play, interviews, (played) phone conversations, etc., as well as the democratic, speaking and listening compoment (possibly guided by established rules of discussion) for group discussions, class talks, debates for the purpose of conflict resolution, etc. The monological forms comprise narrating, reporting and presenting in various contexts (with the clear, appealing dissemination of content as central objective), but also reciting, the deliberate creative reading out loud and many forms of school theater, which also includes powerfully expressive language.

The “listening” aspect is generally practiced in conjunction with speaking and its attendant objectives. However, it is imperative that it be supported with appropriate, targeted assignments – be they related to the understanding of content, democratic discussion behavior, or the quality of reciting a poem. Simply listening without a clear purpose or focus is not very productive. The important aspect is “differentiated listening” even in those learning situations that serve to observe linguistic anomalies, e. g. recognizing different dialectal variants in the first language (with audio samples) or the sensitization to certain characteristics in oral expression of a person or group. The listening competencies here favor the important and exciting aspect of linguistic reflection.

Aside from the referenced forms which concern primarily communicative exercises and learning situations, there is also a type of skills-related training situations which is not centered around a defined content, but a language aspect. To this category belong the aforementioned differentiation exercises of simliar phonemes (example: č / ć, see chapter 2a) and other sound discrimination and pronunciation practice exercises, particulary in the lower level classes. The corresponding practice can occur either through reproductive speech exercises, or a somewhat freer guided speech (in reproductive speech, a pattern is repeated and rehearsed, in guided speech, a template is followed with variations; see scaffolding, described in vol. 1 (Promoting writing) in chapter 4d of the introduction, as well as in the handbook “Foundations and backgrounds” in chapter 8A.5a. In broader sense, vocabulary work and the mediation of expanded means of verbal expression can be counted as skills-related training. Both areas are of high importance for HLT because they help to lead students to a developed competence in the first language and to a bilinguality that is a balanced as possible; see chapter 2b and 2c.

b) About the attitude of instructors in terms of discussions and questions

If students have to expand and develop their linguistic competences, they require adequate time and application opportunities. The extent afforded to them depends largely on the discussion and questioning behavior of the instructor. If teacher A constantly communicates in the traditional, narrow “query mode” (“What is the name of the longest river in our country of origin?”, “Where did the protagonist of our story live?” etc.), his/her students will hardly be able to develop linguistically. Conversely, if teacher B poses open questions or engages the students with prompts, rather than narrow, inauthentic questions, the students are automatically led to a developing oral language production. Examples of such questions might include “What have you learned about the rivers and lakes in our country?”, “Discuss, what you like or dislike in the protagonist’s behavior in our story!”.

Unfortunately, too many instructors tend to intuitively embrace an attitude of questioning and discussing – presumably steeped in their own school experiences – which affords the students far too little opportunities to speak. Investigations have shown that the speaking share of entirely normal teachers is often 20 to 30 times higher than the share of individual students. In order to improve this situation in their own teaching approach, instructors should observe the following points:

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- Do not repeat the students' answers (this so-called "teacher-echo" seems redundant and prevents students' getting accustomed to speak loudly and clearly). Similarly unfortunate is the ritual acknowledgement of answers with "good!", "super!", "exactly" etc.; which corresponds to an outdated teacher-centered style.

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- In discussing texts, content, problems or conflicts, work primarily with conversation prompts or at least wide, genuine questions (avoid spurious, narrow questions). Such prompts for an introduction to a conversation and its continuation should be carefully planned; they are only quasi internalized with experience gained from much teaching practice.

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- Agreeing on rules and rituals and practicing them with the class allows the instructor to step into the background as much as possible. For instance, in group discussions or class discussions, the students can very well call on themselves or pass on the word to someone else, if this has been practiced, and if a prompt or an assignment was issued at the beginning (and not a question by the teacher which automatically calls for an answer).

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- The same goal is supported with the choice of a student-centered teaching style which at least reduces the instructor's central and dominant position in terms of the share of speaking opportunity (see also the handbook "Foundations and backgrounds", chapters 5 and 6). Admittedly, this is a challenging task for HLT where the instructors must often manage several classes or groups at the same time. Nevertheless, here too, a teacher-centric approach can be mitigated through delegating some of the responsibility to the students.

c) Observing oral performance, assessing and targeted promotion

The observation and promotion-oriented assessment of oral performance is more time-consuming than the one for written texts. Listening and analyzing is only possible with audio or video recordings. This generally exceeds the scope of what is possible. However, it should be applied in notable cases (e.g. an audio recording while a student reads a text), as it leads to much more accurate results.

To avoid the danger of generalized and therefore not very useful assessments in the area of oral competence, it is recommended to follow a criteria-oriented, focused approach which, naturally, has to be adjusted

according to student age and proficiency level. See also chapter 7 in the handbook "Foundations and backgrounds" (Promotion-oriented performance assessment, with excellent practice examples in Part B). To complement them, here are some additional hints:

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- In terms of a "formal", declared observation and assessment situation (e.g. a presentation, scene of a play, a recitation, etc.): prior to the event, clear criteria should be established and communicated, if possible in form of a criteria matrix with several points. This renders the assessment more transparent for the students and offers immediate starting points for subsequent fostering and continuation of work. Finding appropriate exercises and forms of training is part of the instructors' professionalism.

Another advantage of observation sheets with stated criteria is that students (at least from the 3rd grade on) can fill out the matrix, and thereby strengthen their sensibility concerning the important points. An example of the assessment sheet for the valuation of presentations can be found in the handbook "Foundations and backgrounds" in chapter 7 B1; see also the volume "Promoting reading in the first language", #18 (matrix for self-evaluation in reading out loud).

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- With regard to "informal", not especially announced observations (e.g. in group or class discussions, student presentations, individual readings or similar observable performances), it is useful if the instructor also takes notes about possible careful observations ("X must learn to listen more closely and to respond to the others", "Y has difficulties with the pronunciation of the <v> sound", "Z has made good progress in speaking freely" etc.). Following that, or at a later appropriate time, the instructor can communicate his/her observations to the students concerned, with concrete suggestions for practical improvements.