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ACTUALIDADES INVESTIGATIVAS EN EDUCACION



THE CHUNGOPOINT METHOD: MAKING THE MOST OF THE STUDENTS' EFFORT TO SPEAK THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

EL MÉTODO CHUNGOPOINT: APROVECHANDO AL MAXIMO EL ESFUERZO DE LOS ESTUDIANTES PARA HABLAR EL LENGUAJE EXTRANJERO EN LA CLASE

Fernando Rubio Alcalá¹

Abstract: Making students speak a foreign language (FL) in the classroom is considered to be a difficult task for teachers all around the world. In a typical classroom, students tend to avoid speaking a FL for several reasons. This prompts teachers to look for new ideas to motivate their students towards an oral practice. A wide range of activities which work just for a single situation are available, but few general methods for encouraging verbal production of FL can be found. This article proposes a possible alternative: the Chungopoint (Rubio y Petidier 2002), a method devised to use at anytime with oral activities no matter the structures or points involved. By using this method, students find themselves interacting in the FL in a playful way. When language students get used to it, oral activities become a natural, desired, and meaningful part of the class.

Key words: CHUNGOPOINT, FOREIGN LANGUAGE, ORAL ABILITIES, ORAL METHOD, COMMUNICATION

Resumen: En la mayoría de los contextos donde se aprende una lengua extranjera, es de sobra conocida la dificultad que encuentran muchos profesores para lograr que el alumnado utilice la lengua destino de forma oral. Son diversas las razones por las que las oportunidades de usar la lengua destino se minimizan, y a pesar de que el profesorado busca nuevas ideas para motivar a su alumnado para la práctica oral, sólo se encuentran actividades que son válidas para situaciones muy concretas, y el problema continúa en las siguientes sesiones. En este artículo se propone una posible alternativa: el Método Chungopoint (Rubio y Petidier 2002). Este método está diseñado para utilizarlo siempre que se practique la lengua oral, ya sean las estructuras o funciones dadas. Al usar este método, los estudiantes se encuentran interactuando comunicativamente en la lengua destino de forma lúdica, y cuando se acostumbran a las pautas y reglas del método, las actividades orales se convierten en una parte de la clase natural, deseada y significativa.

Palabras clave: CHUNGOPOINT, LENGUA EXTRANJERA, PRODUCCIÓN ORAL, MÉTODO ORAL, COMUNICACIÓN.

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It is a fact that oral communication is one of the main priorities of any FL teaching method worldwide. Since the first steps of the development of the Communicative Approach, speaking has been regarded as one of the most important skills to deploy in the FL classroom. However, in many contexts it is usually neglected in favor of the other skills, namely, writing.

Speaking a FL is a critical skill. Thus, in the natural order of school language acquisition, speaking is usually the last skill that is acquired, since it not only involves knowing the language, but also using it for communication. Speaking requires the speakers to pronounce some sounds their speech organs are not used to articulating. Speaking occurs spontaneously, so learners have little time to process the information. In most cases, speaking involves listening, which is also difficult to acquire if the speaker is unfamiliar or the speech is not accommodated (see Ross and Berwick 1992, for instance, for further information on discourse accommodation).

Furthermore, when trying to implement oral activities, there is a clear difficulty in controlling the students' interactions. If the students are asked to practice speaking the FL with each other, for instance in pairs, they usually tend to revert to their mother tongue, since using the FL requires a lot of cognitive effort. Also, the students are less motivated when they realize that they do not have the proficiency to produce adequate exchanges. However, during teacher-controlled exercises, they have to speak the FL out loud in front of their peers, which may raise their inhibitions. Thus, oral practice of a FL is a threat for both teacher and students, and as a result there seems to be a loss of motivation to perform oral tasks (to see a more complete view of the panorama, see Montijano-Cabrera 2003).

Implementing the Chungopoint Method

This method follows a simple procedure: when an oral activity is going to take place, the students are told to speak only the FL: otherwise, they will be given a chungopoint (whenever the teacher hears a student speaking his/her own language). The chungopoint is a little teacher-made laminated paper rectangular card (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The chungopoint card



When a student is given a chungopoint, s/he can get rid of it in the next oral exercise by trying to get another student to speak his/her native language. If s/he gets it, s/he tells the teacher whom s/he has given the chungopoint to, so that the teacher marks off the chungopoint in his/her control list.

As chungopoints are taken and given, students hesitate to speak in their own language to their peers and start using the FL in a natural way. At first, since they are not used to thinking and speaking in the FL, the students use a lot of non-verbal communication, such as gestures and mimes, which is useful in developing strategic competence (especially in lower level students). As the Chungopoint Method becomes part of the language class, the students disregard their own language and become accustomed to using the FL naturally. Since the students in beginning levels have limited knowledge of the FL, loudness is reduced.

Whenever the chungopoint is done, students should stand up and participate with different peers around the classroom. Because speaking is difficult at this point, and students can "get lost," they should also carry their notebooks to fill in information and to write answers. A written aid with the structures to practice may be of great help to students.

Origins and profile

The method comes entirely from classroom practice. After having tested a variety of methods, the one shown here seems to have worked better for many teachers in Spain (Rubio y Petidier 2002). It has been implemented and has proven appropriate for different ages and levels (from 6 to 21, and from beginners to high-intermediate students).

Pedagogical bases

Token system

The method is based on a well-known psychological technique that consists in giving tokens or rewards to a person for behavior modification. When a person is given a partial positive reward, s/he is motivated to get more. Although getting a chungopoint might seem to be negative, the students have the chance to get rid of it; moreover, their grades are not affected. The positive rewards are both the chance to get rid of it and to avoid getting another one by using only the FL.

Learning styles

According to Reid (1987), respecting the students' learning styles in a FL classroom favors their learning. Reid mentions three main categories of learning: perceptive, cognitive and social.

The perceptive learning style can be visual, auditory or kinesthetic. In a typical language classroom the first two are usually emphasized, allowing almost no room for the kinesthetic one, because, among other reasons, movement in the classroom may threaten teacher's control. The Chungopoint Method is to be practiced by students standing up and walking around the classroom. Apart from letting the students stretch their legs, the students perceive communication as something more real, since they can interact with different partners and can use non-verbal communication more easily than they can while sitting down.

Also, because activities are not teacher-controlled but "privately spoken," students can choose any of their peers for conversation, favoring then particular social learning styles. They are not forced neither to speak in public nor to work with an undesired partner. Thus, introverted students, for instance, may reduce their language anxiety.

Pair-group/class work, teacher/learner control and accuracy/fluency oral practice

Byrne (1987) sees oral practice implementation within an election of three contrasted elements of pair/group class work, teacher/learner control, and accuracy/fluency oral practice. First, the teacher can work with the whole class or divide them into pairs or groups. His/her decision will obviously influence the type of activity done. Secondly, the oral activity can be controlled by the teacher or the learner, and again, their decisions will create variations in the implementation of the activity. Lastly, the teacher can focus on accuracy or fluency in the verbal production of the FL.

In most oral practices, the teacher will have to choose the activity design according to his/her aims and class characteristics (age, behavior, etc.), but his/her decision will favor or impede a specific form of oral practice. In fact, there are advantages and disadvantages in each form. For example, if an activity is teacher –controlled, students will talk in front of the others, and mistakes can be corrected instantly, but they will be prone to experiencing anxiety, which will impair their performance (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992). According to Long, Adams, McLean and Castaños (1976), oral practice in small groups improved the quality and quantity of interaction, but Abello-Contesse (1995) reported the opposite in his research. In spite of all this, the dilemma of choosing a specific form of oral practice does not happen with

the Chungopoint Method, because the activity is filtered through the different stages and choices made by the students. Before actually starting the oral activity, the teacher explains a structure and has the option of showing the students several examples. At this point, the teacher works with the entire class, and thus it is a teacher-controlled activity. When the Chungopoint starts, the activity becomes learner directed, focused naturally on fluency and pair work. Therefore, by following these guidelines, the oral activity has a much higher potential of encouraging production in the FL as compared to other oral activities in the language classroom.

The Chungopoint and anxiety

According to Horwitz et al (1991), learning a foreign language is more anxiety-provoking than learning any other subject. Actually, Crookall & Oxford explain that anxiety "...is a form of serious personal discomfort, and most people simply fail to perform at their best under such constraints" (1991, p. 43). The literature indicates a negative correlation between anxiety and performance (see MacIntyre & Gardner (1991) for a review of the literature). In the case of speaking, Horwitz & Young (1991, p. 29) point out that "difficulty in speaking in class is probably the most frequently cited concern of the anxious foreign language students". Therefore, finding a way to avoid speaking anxiety is paramount.

According to our experience, the Chungopoint Method generates low levels of anxiety because the students are free to choose their partners, do not have to talk in front of the class and are not controlled by the teacher. Therefore, they do not feel anxious at being evaluated when speaking the FL.

Rules of the game

As the Chungopoint is considered a game, it has its own rules. The rules are always reiterated at the beginning of an activity by showing students a poster that contains them. When a student breaks a rule, s/he will be given a chungopoint card. These are the rules proposed for primary and secondary level students:

RULE STUDENTS	TO GET THEM USED TO...
You must not shout	talk softly.
You must not push anybody	speak peacefully.
You can't stay sitting on your chair	move around the class and find different partners.
You must tell your teacher you've given a chungopoint card	tell the teacher so that s/he can control his/her chungopoint card list.
You can only speak English	speak only English.
You can only give one chungopoint per session	spend as less time as possible when trying to get rid of a chungopoint card.
You can only speak your mother tongue when all students have sat down at the end of the activity	control the class more easily.
(Think of more rules for your context...)	

Further comments

Here are some tips for the teacher to overcome possible problems:

If a student gets too many chungopoints, s/he will not be motivated to do the oral task any longer. So you can use the chollopoint card, which functions as a joker (it allows the student to get rid of a chungopoint). Try to give it to him/her at any time in class, provided s/he answers something correctly (make it very easy if necessary).

If two students quarrel because one of them does not recognize that s/he has spoken his native language, the one who has a chungopoint keeps it, and the other gets one. Although this may seem unfair, it avoids future problems of this type.

If a student gets angry when getting a chungopoint, do not react. It is a usual behavior in some students, but they will forget soon. Sometimes it is advisable to remind them it is just a game. Also, when a student avoids speaking the FL, it is because his/her level of proficiency is very low. Try to interact with him/her to facilitate speaking. Some problematic students usually try to hide within the group, so as not to be seen by the teacher, and they do not tend to speak loudly. It might help to give one of them a chungopoint secretly so that s/he has to get rid of it. Although s/he will not do the proper oral task that particular time, s/he will probably feel motivated for the next time. Because each context is different, every teacher will have to find his/her own device to make this method work.

CONCLUSION

The Chungopoint Method has been proposed as a possible alternative to foster oral production in the foreign language classroom. Loudness, anxiety, lack of participation, stillness, and other negative circumstances are prevented from happening when this method is used. As it occurs with any other method implementation, students need time to adapt and learn the rules of the method, and the more it is used, the easier it is for the students to follow the guidelines of the activity and the promotion of language acquisition.

Since one of the pedagogical basis is a token system administration, students find a positive reward to get rid of a chungopoint card and to avoid speaking their native language. Thus, students find themselves for the first time with the need to communicate, firstly using non-verbal language (gestures, facial expressions, etc.), and then starting to use small chunks of language. Teachers that have been using the Chungopoint method for more than two years with the same class report that students get used to speaking the foreign language automatically, leaving no need for the teacher to control the communicative exchanges. Oral production becomes more natural, spontaneous and learner-centred.

Despite the pedagogical bases of the method and data coming from a longitudinal study (unpublished) prove the effectiveness of the chungopoint method, future empirical research can proceed to find evidence in different contexts. The knowledge gained from such studies would have the potential to significantly improve the insights of the method, help in the dissemination of the method, and facilitate the development of oral production in the foreign language classroom.

Information and materials:

Free materials for photocopy (chungopoint cards, rules poster, class list sheet, activities and more information in Spanish, etc.) can be downloaded at Richmond's website <http://www.richmondelt.com/spain/bookshelf>.

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