Misechko O.Ye.
Exploring social content of information gap technique in the English classroom
Misechko Olga Yevgenivna, Doctor Hab. of Pedagogical Sciences (EdD), Professor
Ivan Franko Zhytomyr State University
Zhytomyr, Ukraine

Abstract

The study is devoted to the exploration of the potential application of the information gap activities for developing social skills of the English language learners. The paper reports on the preliminary findings of the analysis of how high Ukrainian student teachers and practitioner teachers evaluate the social effectiveness of different types of information gap activities. Three types of information gap activities were singled out, following Prabhu's model (1987): fact-finding gaps, opinion-gaps; reasoning-gaps. Task preference questionnaire-based investigation was organized. The results show that Ukrainian pre-service and in-service teachers still need to be better informed about the meaning of the term, possible types of information gap tasks, peculiarities of their design and arrangement, social dimension of their application.

Key words: information gap; fact-finding gap activities; reasoning-gap activities; opinion-gap activities; social skills.

Introduction

Since 2001, the secondary school English language syllabus in Ukraine has been undergoing serious changes to be adapted to the common European standards of learning, teaching and assessing modern languages known as the *Common European Framework of References for Languages* [4]. As a result, some new concepts, techniques, criteria for describing language proficiency have been brought into wide circulation in the field of foreign language education. Ukrainian teachers of English have thus been confronted with a range of psychological, pedagogical, and informational problems. One of them is to provide learners with ample opportunities to build their social interaction on sharing information and bridging information gaps.

The so called 'information gap' activities are well described as a communicative technique for oral language development in an EFL setting. Learners get exposure to language as a component of reciprocally active exchange of unknown before facts, views, feelings, impressions, observations, guesses, opinions, assumptions between two or more speakers participating in it. While overcoming the gap in the information they possess, the learners put to use and improve their language and communicative skills.

Information gap activities belong to a group of structured activities, i.e. they have to follow certain rules. To create an information gap situation, teachers normally use two sets (or more, depending on the number of participants/groups of participants) of ready-made materials that are kept secret from each other by all sides of the interaction. If a two-sided interaction is organised, students sit in pairs. One looks at a worksheet A while the other looks at a worksheet B, the necessary restriction being not to peep into each other's worksheets. Both of the two worksheets covers the same matter but with different elements missing (facts, details of the map, data, elements of the picture, etc.). After a thorough analysis of the card and deciding what information is missing, students start inquiring each other of the necessary elements to complete the card, so that by the end of the interaction both of them could have possessed the same amount of information.

The term 'information gap' covers a great variety of tasks with the objective to convey or to request information. The information that students must seek can range from very simple to complex. As distinguished by Prabhu (1987), there are three main categories of information gap tasks: information gaps (which are better to call fact-finding gaps); reasoning gaps; opinion gaps.

Information-gap activity, according to Prabhu [6, p. 46], involves a transfer of given information from one person to another, from one place to another, or from one form to another. Examples are (a) describing a person from a range of people in the picture in such a way that the other student can guess the identity, or (b) locating the places on the map when a student has some places missing on his/her map while they are labeled on his/hers partner's map, or (c) giving instructions to draw a picture, or (d) completing a picture/ table with information available in a given piece of text. Information-gap activity may be looked at as a useful preliminary to reasoning-gap activity.

Reasoning-gap activity presupposes deriving some new information from the given information through processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, negotiating, working things out in the mind [6, p. 46]. Examples are (a) working out a teacher's timetable on the basis of given class timetables, or (b) deciding what course of action is best for a given purpose and within given constraints, or (c) deciding what attractions would be most appropriate on a small island to develop it as a tourist resort and discussing how to publicize it.

Opinion-gap activity is built on identifying and articulating personal preferences, feelings, or attitudes in

response to a given situation, or using factual information and formulating arguments to justify one's opinion [6, p. 47]. A good example of it is taking part in the discussion on a social or moral issue.

Fact-finding gap activities are concentrated mainly on the exposure of data that is why they have to satisfy the requirement of plenitude and exactness for successful information transfer. They are usually executed in the so-called 'one-step' linear sequence (a query of information – information transfer). Due to some simplified character they can be used as a useful preparatory link to reasoning-gap activities, which require far more difficult process of negotiating the meaning, finding out course-and-effect relations between the facts, accounting for co-factors involved in the situation and suggested in the activity-card. Opinion-gap activities, which foresee authentication and articulation of individual feelings, preferences and choices, in their turn, are based on an information exchange which has very personal character and cannot be preliminary fixed in the activity-card. Therefore, interaction may take place without clear prediction of its results, with the large level of relativity of the concept of a 'true' or 'incorrect' answer, and with complications in formulating one's own attitude not so much in terms of language means as in terms of ideas. So, to achieve communicative effect in gap-bridging activities, it is equally important to accurately render the preset information from the card and to create one's own meanings.

The study of information gap technique of teaching languages has developed apace in the last few decades. There is an opinion (H. Brown 1994) that the term information gap is very broad and "covers a tremendous variety of techniques in which the objective is to convey or to request information" [1, p.181].

But this paper is based on another apprehension of this term which considers information gap from the point of view of its functional communicative effect and impact on the language learner as a 'communicative stress' [3, p.35] or 'immediate communicative problem' [5, p.39]. Such effect appears in the course of authentic interaction when its participants do not just ask and answer questions with quite obvious answers about some subject well known to everyone but go through a real-life situation of sharing something unknown to each other. Some proponents of this approach mark that to tell someone something which you suspect they might already know is 'quite a socially daunting experience' [3, p.35].

G.Brown and G.Yule (1984) emphasize the importance of preserving in the process of teaching interaction normal behaviour principles to maintain motivation toward authentic communication. They call a situation, when the interlocutors must pretend as if the information they share has something of a novelty, an artificial information gap and insist on the necessity of creation of a reasonable purpose for communication, by which it is possible to attain 'communicative effectiveness' [2, p. 111-112].

W. Littlewood (1981) underlines the functional aspect of communication built on filling information gaps and remarks that the discourse itself serves as a stimulus to intercourse, and the criterion of adequacy of its performance, in the form of the success or failure of the communication [5, p.39]. In other words, each of the participants of dialogic or polilogic communication must possess some part of the whole information, which is exchanged with other participants with the element of 'revelation', and, working together, they solve a certain problem or arrive at a common decision. To give the act of communication more distinct character of collaboration, he suggests to apply some physical barrier (for example, screen) which would make it impossible to peep into each other's informative card.

Both above-mentioned interpretations of the information gap coincide in some key points: 1) topmost attention should be given to the meaning of utterance, but not to linguistic items and the way to combine them (it is important, but not dominant in communication); 2) interaction should be directed at completion of some practical task and achievement of certain goal (but not simply exchange of questions and answers with the purpose of communicative drill); 3) the procedure of asking questions should contain the element of uncertainty about the content of the answer and in this way resemble more natural communication.

Supporters of information exchange on the basis of authentic communicative stimulus (Littlewood 1981; Brown of and of Yule 1983; Prabhu 1987; Cross 1991; Neu and Reeser 1997 et al.) specify that patterns of interaction provided with the help of information gap activities suggest both sharing information (asking-answering questions) and processing information (discussion, comparison, evaluation, decision-making). Thus, the learners get involved into reciprocally active process of building linguistic competence that is mutually useful for all interlocutors in their effort to solve a communicative problem.

The present paper aims to highlight the issue that has been less focused on in the mentioned researches. It draws special attention to the idea that alongside undoubted linguistic effect, information gap-filling technique is quite a personally and socially challenging experience.

Social dimension of interaction assumes that communicative language learning is a deeply social event that requires from a learner – as a social agent – the incorporation of a wide range of competences in interpersonal and social relationships, social and cultural values, cognitive skills, personal attitudes and behavioural patterns. As the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2001) notes, all

language communication is strictly affected by "sensitivity to social conventions (rules of politeness, norms of governing relations (...), linguistic codification of certain fundamental rituals in the functioning of a community" [4, p.13]. In this connection, one of the objectives of language education becomes to promote favourable development of the learner's social skills. This means that teachers of English must pay greater attention to the social behaviour patterns that information gap activities convey.

This necessity has been touched upon by W.Littlewood (1981) by introducing the term 'social interaction activity' [5, p. 43]. He also has formulated two mail rules to make an activity socially interactive: 1) to create a situation when "the learner is expected to let social as well as functional considerations affect his choice of language"; 2) to evaluate the language the learner produces "in terms of its social acceptability as well as its functional effectiveness" [5, p.43]. But among the number of activities he suggested to create opportunities for social interaction in the foreign language classroom, information gap activities were not mentioned.

The study, participants, instrumentation

This paper reports on the preliminary findings of the analysis of what student teachers and practitioner teachers think about possibilities of information gap activities for social development of the English language learners. With the idea of investigating how well the participants of the study are acquainted with the information gap technique and how high they evaluate the social effectiveness of such activities, a questionnaire-based study was organized.

The study was conducted among two groups of participants: A) 4th year students of the Institute of Philology and Journalism of the Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University (Zhytomyr, Ukraine) for whom English was their second major; they were upper-intermediate and advanced learners of English, representing the B2+ and C1 levels in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; to date the group was numbering 32 people ; what needs to be taken into consideration is the fact that most of the students intend to enter the English language teaching profession where using information gap activities is expected to become part and parcel of their every-day responsibilities, and B) in-service teachers of English who were listeners of the refreshment-training course at the Zhytomyr Regional Institute of Post-diploma education; their practical experience of teaching was not less than 5 years; to date the group was numbering 15 people; they were expected to have had some expertise in using information gap activities in their teaching practice because it had been presupposed by the requirements the secondary school English language syllabus in Ukraine since 2001.

First, both groups of participants were involved into exchange of their ideas as to how they understand the meaning of the term 'information gap technique' and what kinds of information are mostly shared by people in the course of communication. Then, the subjects of the study were presented with a theoretical input on the issue and participated in a workshop during which they had an opportunity to practice different types of information gap activities.

After that, they were suggested to answer some open-ended questions meant to reflect the perceptions held by the participants as to the following: if their previous ideas of the information gap technique coincided with what they learned at the workshop; which of the evaluated tasks they were ready to use in their classroom instruction; what circumstances had prevented them from using the tasks before; what factors might foster the successful use of the technique. Besides, the respondents were asked to rate 12 information gap-filling tasks included into the workshop on a five-point scale (from 1- not at all to 5-very strongly) according to the following criteria: how often the task was met in EFL learning (for A-group)/ teaching (for B-group) practice; how often it could be used in the English classroom; how complicated it looked; how close it was to real-life situations; how important it could be for personal and social development of learners.

In the choice of types of information gap activities for the workshop and the background questionnaire, the leading factor was their conformity to social behaviour pattern or personal skill. Following Prabhu's model [6], we singled out and classified different information gap activities into similar groups with the only difference that the first group was defined as fact-finding activities – to distinguish between more concrete tasks of the first group and more abstract skills needed for opinion-gap and reasoning-gap activities. The distribution of selected activities into corresponding groups is reflected in Table 1.

Table 1

Distribution of information gap-based tasks into groups of activities

Groups of information gap activities		
Types of tasks		
Fact-finding activities	Opinion-gap activities	Reasoning-gap activities
'Filling in the gaps on the maps or schemes', 'Giving and receiving instructions', 'Describing and drawing',	'Making the best choice',	'Logical arranging by description', 'Negotiating a decision',

'Finding/ identifying by the given description', 'Filling in crosswords on the basis of definitions', 'Spotting similarities and differences', 'Filling in gaps in texts', 'Reconstructing texts, poems, dialogues, pictures'		'Solving logical problems and puzzles'

Data analysis

The author of the article sticks to the idea that the information gap technique contains a powerful source of possibilities for building learners' interactive skills, communicative strategies, social behaviour patterns with the help of a vast variety of domains, topics, communicative situations, tasks. Analysis of the mentioned above types of information gap activities from the perspective of their social acceptability leads to the conclusion that they may help improve learners' ability to attain effectively the following skills:

- social skills (cooperating, sharing, being tolerant, negotiating, reaching a consensus),
- daily living skills (using different equipment, performing operations),
- communicative skills (gathering information, describing, defining, finding by description, spotting similarities and differences, sequencing, articulating personal preference, making decisions, formulating arguments).

As the first step in data analysis, definitions given by both groups of the respondents for the notion of information gap technique were summed up and compared. The result of investigation testifies that A-group have very indefinite and hypothetical, with a high level of generalization, idea of what information gap is. Student teachers of English belonging to this group described it in such words as "lack or absence (complete or partial) of information about a certain type of activity, sphere of life of a man", "absence (complete or partial) of certain volume of information concerning this or that field of knowledge", "insufficient bulk of information" etc. While teachers' replies (group B) demonstrated kind of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the term, confusion of this type of activity with the task "to fill in the gap", that is used for organizing merely linguistic (but not communicative) activity connected with putting in missed letters in words, of filling blanks in sentences.

As for the most popular kinds of information to be shared in everyday life, both groups of study subjects responded in unison and specified on an exchange of facts first, then – opinions, and exchange of arguments turned out to be the third in the row.

As the results, acquired from a task preference questionnaire-based study, show, when writing about mostly often practiced information gap tasks, A-group have mentioned "filling in gaps in texts" (although, according to the criteria of desired usage in the classroom, they would prefer to do "fill in the gaps on the maps or schemes" tasks), while B-group admitted "giving and receiving instructions" both as their real and desired first choice practice. Both groups coincided in rating "describing and drawing" task as taking the second place among those most often used. They also gave very identical answers as to frequency of occurrence of some other information gap tasks in their classroom practice: "reconstructing texts, poems, dialogues, pictures" (occupies the 4th and the 5th place in A-group and B-group correspondingly); "finding/ identifying by the given description" (the 7th and the 8th place), "filling in crosswords on the basis of definitions" (the 8th and the 9th place). No big discrepancy is met in placing such information gap tasks as "filling in the gaps on the maps or schemes" (the 8th and the 6th place in A-group and B-group correspondingly); "making the best choice" (the 9th and the 7th place); "logical arranging by description" (the 5th and the 3d place). Similarity of these data in both groups of respondents confirms to the fact how often different types of information gap tasks are used in today's English classroom practice in Ukrainian schools. It is also important to add that sometimes the low score of a task means that it has never been practiced and is totally unknown to the respondents, so they had to rate such tasks with 1 point because there was no "0" option. This conclusion is drawn from informal talks during and after the workshop.

At the same time it's interesting, that after having practiced some other types of information gap activities both students and teachers changed their views quite radically as to rating the activities according to the index of their possible use at the lessons of English. Thus, in students' questionnaires, "filling in the gaps on the maps or schemes" has moved from the 8th place to the 1st; "giving and receiving instructions" – from the 10th to the 3d; "finding/ identifying by the given description" – from the 7th to the 2nd. While the tasks they have mentioned as more frequently used turned to drop down in their rating (e.g. "filling in gaps in texts" moved from the 1st place to the 7th). A similar, although not so radical, picture was observed in the teachers' ratings, too. It may only be inferred that a factor of novelty should be taken into consideration, and information gap tasks should vary in the classroom.

Among the most difficult for implementation tasks both A-group and B-group have marked "negotiating a decision" and "solving logical problems and puzzles". Among the least difficult students named "spotting

similarities and differences" and "describing and drawing" tasks. Teachers' answers on this issue differed. They suggested "giving and receiving instructions" and "reconstructing texts, poems, dialogues, pictures" tasks as the easiest for carrying out.

As most close to the real life situations both groups of the respondents admitted the "giving and receiving instructions" task.

Expressing their opinion concerning reasons that restrained the use of information gap technique, students, as a rule, wrote about lack of information about it; while teachers, besides this reason, also alluded to absence of didactics materials, time-limits at the lesson, different levels of knowledge among students in a class.

Reflecting on the conditions for more active application of this technique, students were looking for intrapersonal resources: enlarging their own knowledge about the types of tasks; improving their skills in using the tasks; amplifying their professional mastery and creativity; developing desire and readiness to implement theory in practice. In the answers of teachers predominance of external stimuli was felt: they were writing about the necessity of more sufficient providing with didactics materials, and more time on their preparation, and higher motivation on the part of their students, which is not impressive and may indicate that Ukrainian teachers are rather unwilling to change their daily teaching routine.

Conclusions

This study has demonstrated that information gap technique has not become broadly applied by Ukrainian secondary school teachers yet. They still need to be better informed about the meaning of the term, types of information gap tasks, peculiarities of their design and arrangement. Special attention in the course of preparation of teachers toward the use of this technique should be given to the social dimension of information gap tasks and their social effectiveness. The distinction between functional dimension of an information gap activity and its social dimension can hardly be a matter of strict division but a very tentative question of a special emphasis the teacher should make to deliver to the learners the precise degree of importance to the social factor during the activity.

Another conclusion that may be drawn is that pre-service level of teacher education proves to be more effective than in-service level for encouraging inner motivation and readiness of prospective teachers of English to use information gap technique.

Finally, the research has shown that awareness of the information gap technique is a necessary but not sufficient condition for its successful implementation in the classroom. It points to the necessity of at least two more conditions: appropriate teaching materials and personal motivation of teachers to make learning more diverse, learner-oriented and socially facilitating.

REFERENCES
1. Brown, H. D. Teaching by Principles: an interactive approach to language pedagogy. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents, 1994. – 416 p.
2. Brown, G. & Yule, G. Teaching the Spoken Language: an approach based on the analysis of conversational English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. – 176 p.
3. Brown, G., A. Anderson, R. Shilcock, and G. Yule. Teaching Talk Strategies for Production and Assessment. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. – 176 p.
4. Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. Council of Europe, 2001. – 260 p.
5. Littlewood, W. T. Communicative Language Teaching. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. – 108 p.
6. Prabhu, N. S. Second Language Pedagogy: a perspective. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987. – 153 p.

Мисечко О.Е. Исследование социального содержания технологии информационного разрыва при обучении английскому языку.

Исследование посвящено изучению возможностей применения заданий, построенных на технологии информационного пробела, для развития социальных умений изучающих английский язык. В статье сообщаются промежуточные результаты анализа того, как оценивают украинские будущие и практикующие учителя социальную эффективность различных видов заданий, содержащих информационный пробел. Со ссылкой на идею Н.Прабху (1987), было выделено три типа заданий с информационным пробелом: задания с фактологическим пробелом; задания с оценочным пробелом; задания с причинно-следственным пробелом. В исследовании был использован опросник для оценки преференций при выборе заданий. Результаты свидетельствуют, что украинские будущие и практикующие учителя все еще недостаточно информированны о значении термина, возможных типах заданий с инфорационным пробелом, особенностях конструирования и проведения таких заданий, социальной составляющей их применения.

Ключевые слова: информационный пробел, задания с фактологическим пробелом; задания с оценочным пробелом; задания с причинно-следственным пробелом; социальные умения.