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PROBLEMATIKA VYTVÁŘENÍ EFEKTIVNÍCH KONVERZAČNÍCH HODIN PRO STUDENTY STŘEDNÍCH ŠKOL

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Thesis

ISSUES OF DESIGNING EFFECTIVE CONVERSATIONAL LESSONS FOR SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Plzeň 2013

Prohlašuji, že jsem práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedené literatury a zdrojů informací.

V Plzni dne 27. června 2013   ………………………….

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis deals with issues of designing effective conversational lessons for secondary school students. In the theoretical part, it describes why teaching speaking is important in a language learning process and it presents various ways of improving the effectiveness of speaking-based lessons concerning age-related differences of students. Diverse communication-focused activities are introduced in the theoretical section. The research part includes five lesson observations and their analysis in regard with the effectiveness of the observed conversational lessons. The results of the research show that the practise differs from the theory in many aspects. Research limitations as well as suggestions for further research are provided at the end of this work.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis deals with issues of designing effective conversational lessons for secondary schools students. It is believed by many authors and teachers that speaking is one of the most important skills that should be practised in a language learning process. However, teaching speaking is also very demanding and teachers often face various problems when preparing communication-focused lesson plans. Moreover, the role of speaking is frequently underestimated and more grammar, writing etc. is incorporated in language lessons to the exclusion of speaking. All these factors led to my decision to examine this area of language teaching in practise.

In the Theoretical Background section, this work introduces basic theoretical information on teaching speaking to secondary school students in regard with age-related differences of the students. It, for instance, presents types of activities used in conversational classes and it subsequently mentions features of an effective speaking activity. The chapter also deals with challenges in speaking. Elementary ways of testing speaking are briefly described at the end of the chapter.

A research done for the purposes of this thesis is described in the following part. The research was done through observations. The Methodology chapter includes research characteristics, tools and procedure of the research. The specific research questions are as follows:

- What types of activities were used within the observed conversational classes?
- Which of the speaking-based activities were effective (i.e. engaging, making students use L2) and which of them were not?
- What other elements made the conversational lessons effective?

Additionally, results of the research are presented in a separate chapter. First, results of individual observed lessons are described with the aid of graphs. Next, the overall results are noted down. The following chapters contain implications for language teaching, limitations of the research and suggestions for further research. The whole work is enclosed with the Conclusion chapter where the main ideas of the thesis are summarized.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter describes speaking in a foreign language in general; it deals with skills taught in a language learning process. The chapter also covers speaking as one of four skills and introduces a methodological model for teaching productive skills. Teaching speaking is discussed in the Theoretical Background with specialization on secondary school students who are seen according to their age-related differences. The role of speaking in Czech Curriculum is taken into consideration as well as the role of speaking as a part of a Maturita exam. Furthermore, types of activities which can be used in conversational classes are mentioned in this chapter and some effective speaking activities are emphasized. The role of motivation and feedback is also discussed later in this chapter as well as challenges in speaking. Next, formats of testing speaking are briefly outlined.

Speaking in a Foreign Language

According to Nunan (1991), "To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the most important aspect of learning a second or foreign language" (p. 39). Learning to speak in a foreign language is a process where learners often see their goals in achieving speaking skills comparable to native speakers in the terms of form of the language. "Second language learners who attempt to produce second language forms orally do not in fact produce linguistic forms identical to those produced by native speakers; rather they produce interlanguage forms" (Tarone, 2005, p. 486). Formal aspects of a second language learning include "the sounds of the language, morphology and syntax of the language, discourse markers of the language, and lexis: words" (Tarone, 2005, p. 485). These aspects of language learning are important but learners of foreign languages should manage to acquire not only formal aspects of particular language but they should be able to use it in certain functions and speaking genres.

Functions of a language

We can distinguish three main functions of a learner language: transactional, interpersonal, and ludic. "The interpersonal function is all about maintaining and

sustaining good relations between people" (Harmer, 2007, p. 343); it includes politeness strategies and rules of conversation. "Transactional function has as its main purpose conveying information and facilitating the exchange of goods and services"(Harmer, 2011, p. 343). Ludic function is not as frequently used as interpersonal or transactional functions. According to Tarone (2005), "ludic discourse involves the use of language for the purpose of amusing and entertaining oneself or others" (p. 490).

Conversational strategies

As it is mentioned in Tarone (2005): "Speakers use communication strategies to resolve difficulties they encounter in expressing an intended meaning"(p. 488). Students of L2 languages ought to learn to use discourse markers, or the rules of turn-taking in conversation to be able to communicate properly with other learners or native speakers. Harmer (2011) explains that "students need to be aware of what real conversation looks like and we should give them help in using some of the more important phrases" (p. 344).

Speaking as One of Four Skills

Speaking can be divided from the complex of four skills usually taught in second language learning environment. Besides speaking, the skills are: listening, reading and writing. Speaking is often closely related to writing as writing is also a productive skill. In compliance with Harmer (2011), "It makes little sense to talk about skills in isolation; when we are engaged in conversation, we are bound to listen as well as to speak because otherwise we could not interact with the person we are speaking to" (p. 265). It is therefore not beneficial to strictly detach teaching individual skills in language classes.

All four skills are very often mixed in the second language learning process. Speaking is often used as a tool to make students involved in lessons. Students can be asked to discuss certain topics after reading or listening exercises. As Harmer (2011) says, "Almost any speaking activity is bound to involve listening" (p. 267). This thesis deals with teaching speaking and that is the reason why this skill will be introduced and analysed more or less separately from other skills.

Methodological Model for Teaching Productive Skills

According to Harmer (2011): "Although the productive skills of writing and speaking are different in many ways, we can still provide a basic model for teaching and organising them" (p.275). We ought to bear in mind that teaching productive skills may be done through certain stages. These stages create a basic methodological model.

Harmer (2011) says that "in the lead-in stage, we engage students with the topic" (p. 275). This means that we should prepare students for talking about certain topics. We may try to find out what students already know, what their experience is, or we might make them think of what people say in particular situations.

Next, there is a set the task stage. Within this stage, we tell students what they are going to do. It is always good to demonstrate the activity to make sure that all the students understand what to do. Students can repeat the instructions as well to show that they remember what to do and that they understand the task. This can be done in L2 or L1 in dependence on the needs of a particular class. Students have to be given complete information of what they need to do in the task (Harmer, 2011, p. 275).

Scrivener (2011) mentions the importance of scaffolding which "refers to the way a competent language speaker helps a less competent one to communicate by both encouraging and providing possible elements of the conversation" (p. 227). Some of the effective scaffolding techniques are: showing interest, asking for clarification, encouragement echo, asking conversation-oiling questions etc. (Scrivener, 2011, p.227).

The following stage of the methodological model of teaching productive skills is monitoring the task. As Harmer (2011) mentions: "This may mean going round the class, listening to students working and helping them where they have difficulties" (p. 275).

When students finish working on their task, the stage of feedback should come. Students can then see how well they did the activity. Not only negative but also positive aspects of what they have achieved need to be shown to students. The final stage is the task-related follow-up (Harmer, 2011, p. 275).

To summarize, the basic model for teaching productive skills consists of a lead-in stage where students get engaged with a topic, a set the task stage where learners become aware of what exactly they are going to do, a monitoring stage within which teacher observes students´ work, a stage of feedback and a follow-up stage.

Teaching the Skill of Speaking

In compliance with Ur (1999), "Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important; people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak " (p. 120). A language course should therefore include speaking activities which would expand learners´ ability to express themselves (Ur, 1999, p.120).

Accuracy vs. Fluency

According to Ur (1999), "Language proficiency can be defined in terms of accuracy and fluency; if a learner has mastered a language successfully, that means that he or she can understand and produce it both accurately (correctly) and fluently (receiving and conveying messages with ease)" (p. 103). It is a tendency nowadays to increase the amount of time devoted to improving students´ fluency in conversational lessons. Fluent language is natural and it flows smoothly, which makes the speaker sound more confident and voluble. For that reason, an effective conversational lesson ought to contain parts where fluency is practised. "Fluency is best achieved by allowing the stream of speech to flow" (Brown, 2007, p.324).

Ur says that what is emphasized is "the development of learner´s facility in receiving and conveying messages, with a corresponding lowering of emphasis on accuracy" (p.103). Accuracy seems to become less important in the international and multicultural environment teachers work in lately. However, with focusing only on fluency, students may manage "to produce fairly fluent but barely comprehensible language" (Brown, 2007, p. 323). Both skills need to be practised but we should bear in mind that students are supposed to improve their language by using it practically more than by drilling grammatical or phonetic rules. Students need to be accurate enough to be intelligible and within their learning process they may enhance their skill of accuracy. Teaching communicative skills begins to be mainly message oriented rather that language oriented. In accordance with Brown (2007): "Current approaches to language teaching lean

strongly towards message orientation with language usage offering a supporting role" (p. 324).

Intelligibility as a Goal of Teaching Oral Skills

As it was mentioned above, recent language teaching tends to put stronger emphasis on fluency than accuracy. The most important objective of conversational classes is for the students to gain intelligibility in their communicative discourse. Intelligibility is the ability to be understood by others. Intelligible discourse is comprehensible. Brown (2007) claims: "A now outdated model of English language teaching assumes that intelligibility should be gauged by whether non-native speakers are intelligible to native speakers" (p. 325). Preparing students to talk to native speakers and be intelligible to them is, nevertheless, not the only goal of English conversational lessons. In today´s world it is common that non-native speakers of English need to communicate to other non-native speakers. Therefore, it is useful to be intelligible not only to native speakers of English but also to the non-native ones.

Interaction within Conversational Lessons

Brown claims: "The greatest difficulty that learners encounter in attempts to speak is not the multiplicity of sounds, words, phrases, and discourse forms that characterize any language, but rather the interactive nature of most communication" (Brown, 2007, p.324). Students sometimes know a big amount of rules how to use language in theory but when it comes to a discussion or a debate, they seem to struggle. And that is why the teachers of L2 languages should create a friendly environment in classes and encourage students to become engaged in class discussions. Students should get pieces of advice on how to interact with other participants of discussions and they should be, in the first place, exposed to as much conversational situations as possible.

Teaching Speaking to Secondary School Students

Secondary school students create a significant and diverse category in school education of the Czech Republic. The category of secondary school students is more assorted than the category of primary school students because there are many different types of secondary schools which pupils are able to choose from. Therefore, the age of secondary school students may differ in correspondence with the type of school they attend. Students also differ with regard to their specialization, and programmes of their studies. The field and specialization of studies determine the amount of L2 lessons in students´ schedules as well as the type of secondary school they attend.

Age-related differences in the way of teaching secondary school students

The category of secondary school students is very big and involves young children as well as teenagers and young adults. Each age group demands different approaches in the language learning process. Teachers should, therefore, be aware of the stage of development of their students and adjust their lesson plans to the needs of the pupils.

Teaching children. "One of the most common beliefs about age and language learning is that young children learn faster and more effectively than any other age group" (Harmer, 2011, p. 81). Children are more motivated to study than, for instance, teenagers because they are curious and willing to learn. They are very good at understanding concrete items in language learning but they have difficulties learning and understanding abstract concepts. They are willing to talk about themselves and express themselves among their classmates, which is why communication and oral production should be present even in children´s lessons (Harmer, 2011, pp. 81-82).

Teaching teenagers. Teaching teenagers may often seem useless. Teenagers are considered difficult to teach, uneasy to motivate and almost impossible to get engaged in a learning process. With regard to California Department of Education, "students need guidance and support even though they appear to be pulling away" ("Adolescent Development", n.d.). Speaking should be incorporated in language lessons as it is

important for teenagers to be able to express their opinions. Teenagers need to feel that teachers are fair with them; they need to feel positive relationship even though they may seem rather negative. Moreover, teachers should give teenage students certain amount of autonomy (in choosing topics, activities etc.) as they are ready to make decisions ("Adolescent Development", n.d.).

Teaching young adults. Adult learners, unlike children, have their abstract thinking fully developed and they have learnt to use it in language learning. They have experience with language learning either from previous schools, work and part-time jobs, or personal sphere. They seem to be more disciplined than, for example, teenagers because they have certain goals in their minds that motivate them to study. On the other hand, they can be critical to teaching methods, activities, and even teachers´ attitudes (Harmer, 2011, pp. 84-85).

Speaking as a Part of Czech Curriculum

Speaking, similarly to other language skills, is incorporated in Czech curriculum in the part called Foreign Language. In this section of the Curriculum, there are certain goals and objectives which students of secondary schools should reach by the end of their studies. Students are supposed to reach at least B1 level of reference. These outputs for grammar school and most secondary school students according to the Curriculum are as follows:

- A student forms his/her opinions intelligibly, accurately, fluently, and spontaneously.
- A student reproduces a read or heard authentic text.
- A student presents coherent speech on given topics.
- A student creates consistent texts on a wide range of topics and expresses their opinion.
- A student describes his/her surroundings in detail; describes his/her interests.
- A student uses rich vocabulary in order to develop argumentation without reducing what he/she wants to say.

- A student expresses and defends his/her ideas and opinions by using a suitable verbal form.
- A student reacts spontaneously but accurately in less common situations by using suitable expressions and phrases.
- A student communicates fluently and phonetically well on both, abstract or specific topics in less common and specialized situations.
- A student begins, leads, and ends dialogues with native speakers; he/she takes part in lively discussions on various topics.

(Balada et al.,2007, pp. 16-17)

Speaking According to Common European Framework of Reference

CEFR, Common European Framework of Reference, "describes the levels of proficiency required by existing standards, tests and examinations in order to facilitate comparisons between different systems of qualifications" (*Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment,* p. 1). There are six reference levels – from A1 (basic users) to C2 (proficient users). It is written in the Curriculum that secondary school students are supposed to achieve B1 or B2 level of English (depending on a particular school) in compliance with CEFR at the end of their studies. A student who accomplishes B2 level of reference according to CEFR:

> can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and independent disadvantages of various options (p. 24).

Speaking as a Part of Maturita Exam

An exam from a foreign language has been a part of Maturita exam for a long time. In 2013, a foreign language is incorporated in the compulsory part of Maturita – even

though students are able to choose between a foreign language and Math. It is explained that students may select one of five foreign languages (French, German, Spanish, Russian and English). The form of the exam is the same for all the languages ("Nová maturita", 2013).

Besides reading, listening and writing, Maturita exam tests verbal communication skills as well as interaction skills. The oral exam is assigned by the form of individual worksheets. A student draws one out of at least five worksheets. The worksheet consists of four tasks − each task on a different topic. One of these four tasks is more specialized and is created by particular schools. The topic of this task has to be in compliance with the Curriculum and with School Education Programme. It may differ from school to school on the basis of the school´s specialization. Other three tasks are prepared by CERMAT[1]. Topics created by CERMAT are always general; they are compiled in a document called Catalogue of Exam Requirements ("Nová maturita", 2013).

The verbal exam begins when a student gets one worksheet with the tasks and is given time to prepare for the actual exam. He or she can make some notes and use them when being examined. The process of examining and assessing is done in accordance with the examiner´s worksheet which contains all the instructions needed for a legitimate course of the exam. The student has to deal with four parts of the examination.

First, there is an interview on given topic which is general. Student gets three to five questions that he/she has to answer. This part of the verbal exam takes only about 2 minutes. Second part tests student´s ability of individual speech. The student has visual aid that he/she has to work with. The pupil describes a picture, then compares two pictures, and talks individually about a certain topic related to the pictures. This part lasts for approximately 4 minutes. Third, a specific, vocational topic is presented by the student. S/he has about 5 minutes to talk about particular subject-matter and is given at most two tasks related to the topic. Interaction is the last part of the verbal exam and is done through an interview of the examiner and the examinee. The topic is mostly general and the conversation may take about three minutes ("Nová maturita", 2013).

To summarize, through the oral part of the exam, students need to show their ability to introduce themselves in L2 and answer the interlocutor´s questions; they have to be able

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[1] Centrum pro zjišťování výsledků vzdělávání

to speak individually according to visual materials they receive. Students also need to demonstrate the capability of introducing certain topic on particular subject-matter. Last but not least, pupils must take part in a dialogue and show that they are able to respond appropriately to the interlocutor´s questions.

Teaching Conversation

As stated in Brown (2007), "research on teaching conversation skills historically describes two major approaches for teaching conversation; the first is an indirect approach; … the second is a direct approach" (p. 332). Within the indirect approach, students are more or less free to engage in interaction. On the other hand, the direct approach involves, pursuant to Brown (2007), "planning and conversation program around the specific microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation" (p. 332). In other words, in the indirect method, students acquire conversational competence by taking part in effective tasks. In the direct method, students get to learn the rules and strategies of conversation (Brown, 2007, p- 332).

Types of activities used in conversational classes

Many types of speaking activities can be used in conversational classes. In accordance with Gower (1995), activities are divided into three main categories: controlled activities, guided activities, and creative or freer communication.
Gower (1995) describes controlled activities as follows: "repetition practise or set sentences prompted by picture or word cues – to improve the accurate use of words, structures and pronunciation, and to foster confidence" (p. 100).
Guided activities are, for instance, model dialogues which can be changed by the students so that they can talk about themselves and so that they can communicate about their own needs and ideas. Guided activities are tasks in which students use language (phrases, structures, vocabulary etc.) which they have learnt before (Gower, 1995, p. 101).

In accordance with Gower (1995): "The most important point to remember is that the students must have a reason for speaking in order for the activity to be truly communicative; there must be a gap between the speakers to be filled – either an opinion

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gap and/or an information gap" (p.101). Creative activities are usually prepared to give creative practise for given language items or general fluency practise. Students get the opportunity to experiment to find out how well they are able to communicate in situations where they have to decide what kind of language to use. Within creative or freer activities, students practise their fluent use of language (Gower, 1995, p.101).

These activities may raise students´ level of motivation because students are not made to talk because of the teacher but for their own sake. The creative speaking environment can also help bridge the gap between artificial or unnatural language practise and the language students may need to use in the real world. On contrary, no communication which is limited by the teacher or the classroom can equal the real "outside-the-classroom" communication. For limited communicative situation a teacher may predict some of the language items which can appear (Gower, 1995, p.101).Moreover, quite a lot of mistakes can be made within freer activities. As stated in Gower (1995): "They can be seen as part and parcel of learning to communicate" (p.101). Teachers should not stop students during a free speaking activity but they ought to notice mistakes and talk about them later with the students.

Penny Ur divides activities into topic-based and task-based ones. According to Ur (1999), a topic-based activity "simply asks participants to talk about a (controversial) subject, the main objective being clearly the discussion process itself; [a task-based activity] asks them actually to perform something, where the discussion process is a means to an end" (p. 123).

As it was said above, the goal of a topic-based activity is to talk about a certain topic. What is a good topic, though? Ur (1999) describes it as follows: "A good topic is one to which learners can relate using ideas from their own experience and knowledge … It should also represent a genuine controversy, in which participants are likely to be fairly evenly divided" (p.123).

Task-based activities are goal-oriented. A group of learners is supposed to achieve a certain objective which should be done through their interaction. Objectives of task-based activities are often expressed by an observable result (e.g. notes, drawings, summaries etc.). Task-based activities are enjoyed more by students because they can see some purpose of their speaking and there is a clear goal they need to reach. On the other hand, some students prefer topic-centred activities because they can get into a topic more

deeply and they do not have to reach any decisions. Therefore both - task-based and topic-based activities - should take place in language classes (Ur, 1999, pp. 123-124).

Effective Speaking Activities. There are certain features that a speaking activity should cover. Penny Ur (1999) describes these characteristics of a successful speaking activity. Firstly, learners have to speak a lot. Most of the time of a communicative activity needs to be filled with learners´ talking. Even though it sounds obvious, it is often not happening in classes. Lessons contain too much teacher talking. Secondly, participation must be even. This means that not only talkative students get a chance to speak, but all learners are involved in classroom discussion. Thirdly, the level of motivation needs to be high. If learners are interested in a topic, they are more likely to talk. Last, language needs to be of an acceptable level. Language used by learners should be easily comprehensible to others and the level of accuracy should be of an acceptable level (Ur, p. 120).

Discussion activities. Many different activities can be done in conversational classes. Speaking-based activities usually involve discussion as a part of communication practise. Ur (2007) claims that "instead of the idea, associated with the audio-lingual school, that students should use language in more or less controlled exercises until they have mastered its structures to a high degree, and only then begin to talk freely, it is now accepted that some sort of dynamic, individual and meaningful oral practise should be included in English lessons right from the beginning" (p.2).

The most natural way to practise talking in English is to do it through a discussion. What is a discussion? Ur (2007) describes it as "anything from the simplest question-answer guessing process, through exploration of situations by role-play, to the most complex political and philosophical debates" (p.2). A discussion led in foreign language classes needs to have its aim. The main aim should be an efficient fluency practise. Students should see a purpose of a discussion (e.g. solving a problem, exploring implications of an idea, creating proposals etc.). Students should also learn how to participate cooperatively in a discussion and they should improve their debating skills – i.e. listening to others, not interrupting and speaking clearly (Ur, 2007, p.3).

A useful class discussion is, according to Ur (2007), "a discussion in which as many students as possible say as much as possible" (p.3). Only a limited amount of

students can talk at the same time and therefore it is important to make students talk when there is time for it in class discussions. Ur (2007) adds that "a further characteristic of a successful discussion is the apparent motivation of the participants" (p.3). If students pay attention to the things discussed even when it is not their turn to speak, the discussion is successful.

Discussion activities are suitable for various levels. Ur (1999) describes five basic discussion activities which may be done in conversational classes and may be adjusted to different levels. The activities are: describing pictures, picture differences, things in common, shopping list and solving a problem (p. 128).

Describing pictures is a simple activity suitable for beginners but it can be done with any level. This activity can be done as a group work. Students try to describe pictures in their groups using as many sentences as possible. This can get competitive and therefore motivating for students (Ur, 1999, p.138).

Picture differences is a well-known activity where students exchange questions and answers. As Ur (1999) adds, "the problem here is the temptation to peep at a partner´s picture: your function during the activity may be mainly to stop people cheating" (p.128).

Things in common is a nice discussion activity where students are supposed to find what they have in common and later share it with the rest of the class. According to Ur, it is "an ice-breaking activity, which fosters a feeling of solidarity by stressing shared characteristics of participants" (1999, p.128).

Shopping list is described by Ur (1999): "Students choose three items [out of a table given to them] and try to find for each at least three other buyers − that is, students who have also chosen it" (p.128). This discussion activity may be fun for students because they need to use their imagination as well as their debating skills.

Solving a problem, in compliance with Ur (1999), "usually works well, producing a high level of participation and motivation; as with many simulation tasks, participants tend to become personally involved: they begin to see the characters as real people, and to relate to the problem as an emotional issue as well as an intellectual and moral one" (p.128).

Role Plays. According to Scrivener (2011), "In role play, learners are usually given some information about a role (e.g. a person or a job title) … Learners take a little preparation time and then meet up with other students to act out small scenes using their

own ideas, as well as any ideas and information from the role cards" (p. 220). Scrivener (2011) adds that when we run a role play, we have to make sure students know what is going to happen. The context must be clear and students have to understand the information on their role cards. Enough time should be given to students before the actual beginning of the activity. At the end, there should always be some feedback on how students completed the activity (p. 222).

Real Plays. Reals plays are variations on role plays. Scrivener (2011) says that in real plays "situations and one or more characters are drawn not from cards but from a participant´s own life and world" (p. 222).

Simulations. In compliance with Scrivener (2011), "Simulation is really a large-scale role play; role cards are normally used, but there is often quite a lot of other printed and recorded background information as well – newspaper articles, graphs, memos, news flashes, etc." (p. 224).

The Roles of a Teacher

Within conversation-based lessons, a teacher can play different roles during different activities. According to Harmer (2011), "three have particular relevance if we are trying to get students to speak fluently: prompter, participant, and feedback provider" (p. 347).

A prompter helps students when they cannot think of what to say next or when they get lost in their speeches. The prompter offers discrete suggestions to get an activity going again. This supportive attitude may prevent students from feeling insecure and frustrated.

A participant may take part in class discussions and activities themselves. This way the teacher - participant - can help the activity continue and he/she can maintain a creative atmosphere. Within conversational lessons, the teacher and students can talk almost like equals.

A feedback provider is the third role a teacher can have in speaking-focused lessons. A teacher should give appropriate feedback and sometimes helpful correction may

help students out of some difficulties connected with hesitation or misunderstanding (Harmer, 2011, pp. 347-348).

The Role of Motivation in Conversational Classes

The role of motivation of the students is important in a class no matter what the learning aim is at the certain moment. Therefore, it is relevant to motivate students in conversational classes, too. Gower (1995) talks about encouraging student interaction as one of the ways to motivate: "You should create a comfortable atmosphere where students are not afraid to speak and enjoy communicating with [the teacher] and their fellow students" (p.101).

An other way of encouraging students to speak is to give them plenty of controlled and guided practice according to Gower (1995) – "generally, the lower the level of the students the more controlled and guided practice, compared with freer practice" (p. 101). This does not mean that advanced learners do not need or appreciate practising new vocabulary, grammar structures or phrases before using them.

Furthermore, Gower (1995) claims that speaking activities should be made communicative which encourages purposeful and meaningful interaction between students. Tasks should be created so that students have a reason for speaking. They can be asking for information, finding out or expressing opinions, or giving real information to other students. These kinds of conversational tasks offer a challenge which resembles real-life interaction. Even controlled speaking activities can be challenging for students if they are focused on real events and opinions (p.102).

Last but not least, we should bear in mind to plan speaking activities carefully. According to Gower (1995), "It is often difficult for students to come up with ideas at the same time as having to cope with the language; they need something to speak about, such as a picture, or a purpose like performing a roleplay from the context of a reading text; …carefully set up tasks provide the reason, purpose and guidelines within which students can speak more freely" (p.102).

The Role of Feedback in Conversational Classes

Brown (2007) claims: "One of the keys, but not the only key, to successful second language learning lies in the feedback that a learner receives from others" (p.345). Feedback should therefore be present in speaking-focused classes as well as any other language-based classes. Both positive and negative feedback ought to be given to students. On one hand, too much negative feedback often makes students shut off their attempts at communication. They give up trying to speak as they think that they make too many mistakes and they are not able to succeed in producing something correctly. On the other hand, too much positive feedback serves to reinforce the mistakes students make. This phenomenon can result into persistence of such errors. It would be ideal for the teacher to find the optimal balance between positive and corrective feedback. Optimal feedback should encourage continued communication but it should also pay enough attention to relevant mistakes (Brown, 2007).

When and How to Treat Errors. In language classes students generally expect their errors to be corrected. On the contrary, in natural situations, native speakers do not usually correct non-native speakers´ mistakes. As Brown (2007) says: "A sensitive and perceptive language teacher should make the language classroom a happy optimum between some of the overpoliteness of the real world and the expectations that learners bring with them to the classroom" (p.347). In other words, teachers should correct pupils´ mistakes when it is necessary. They should neither overlook all the mistakes nor correct every single one.

Challenges in Speaking – What Makes Speaking Difficult

There are at least eight areas which can make speaking in classes difficult according to Brown (2007, pp. 326-327):

a) Clustering – fluent speech is phrasal, not word by word. Learners can organize their language output cognitively or physically through such clustering.

b) Redundancy – meaning of language can be made clearer through the redundancy a speaker uses. Learners can benefit from this feature of spoken language.

c) Reduced forms – contractions, elisions and reductions in spoken language can be problematic for language learners. Students who do not learn to use contractions when needed can sound too artificial and academic in their speeches.

d) Performance variables – performance hesitations, pauses and corrections often occur in spoken language. Native speakers prefer certain fillers meanwhile thinking to complete silence. There can, therefore, be a remarkable difference between native and non-native speakers in their hesitation phenomena.

e) Colloquial language – Students should be reasonably familiar with phrases and idioms used as colloquials and they should feel confident in using these structures after practising them in class.

f) Rate of delivery – is another feature typical of fluency in language. Students should achieve acceptable speed besides other salient characteristics of fluency.

g) Stress, rhythm, and intonation – Students ought to be familiar with the most crucial features of English pronunciation when learning the skill of speaking because the intonation, for example, conveys important messages.

h) Interaction – Interaction is the key feature of speaking as the richest component of speaking skill is the creativity of conversational negotiation.

Dealing with Challenges in Speaking

Penny Ur (1999) gives a few suggestions on what to do to solve problems learners may have with speaking in classes. One of the suggestions is to use group work. When learners talk in groups, the amount of learners´ talking in a limited period of time increases. Moreover, students who are afraid to talk in front of the whole class are more

likely to speak in groups. A disadvantage of group work can be seen in the fact that teacher cannot monitor all the groups at once. This means that not all mistakes can be given feedback on. Learners may sometimes even slip into L1 when working in groups (p.121).

An other suggestion is to base the activity on easy language. Ur (1999) says that "the level of language needed for a discussion should be lower than that used in intensive language-learning activities in the same class; it should be easily recalled and produced by the participants, so that they can speak fluently with a minimum of hesitation" (pp.121-122). This means that a teacher needs to review essential language before doing an activity with students.

Next, the choice of the topic must be careful. It stimulates learners´ interest if the topic is appropriate. In other words, students get more motivated if the purpose of the discussion is clear and if they are interested in the chosen topic (Ur, 1999, p. 122).

Learners should also be given some instructions or training in discussion skills. Ur (1999) explains that "if the task is based on group discussion then include instructions about participation when introducing it" (p.122). This means that students need to know exactly what they are supposed to do when completing a task and they need to know how to complete the task effectively.

Finally, students must keep speaking in the target language. According to Ur (1999): "You might appoint one of the group as monitor, whose job is to remind participants to use the target language, and perhaps report later to the teacher how well the group managed to keep to it" (p.122). Still, the best way to keep students talking in the target language is when the teacher monitors them as much as possible.

To sum up, students may find speaking difficult but there are some ways that can help them overcome the difficulties. These are: group work, usage of easy language, careful choice of a topic, training discussion skills and keeping students talk in the target language.

Testing Speaking Skills

It is necessary to test speaking skills as well as all other skills. According to Ur (1999), "when testing oral proficiency of learners we may simply interview them and assess their responses; or use other techniques like role play, group discussion between

learners, monologues, picture description and so on" (p.133). In other words, there are many ways by which we can test speaking skills. A problem arises when we try to choose the most appropriate way to test speaking.

According to Hughes (2003) we can choose from three general formats of testing oral skills. These techniques are: interview, interaction with fellow candidates and responses to audio- or video-recorded stimuli. Interview is probably the most common format used for testing oral skills. However, a disadvantage might be seen in the fact that the examined student usually speaks to the examiner as to a superior and he/she is not willing to take an initiative. There are some elicitation techniques that may help to prevent this problem: questions and requests for information, pictures, role plays, interpreting, prepared monologues etc.

An other testing format is interaction with fellow candidates which can be done through a discussion or a role play. Within interaction with fellow candidates, students may feel more confident than in an interaction with an examiner. On the other hand, one student´s performance can be influenced by the performance of the others. Therefore the pairs of candidates should be chosen carefully when possible.

Next format of testing speaking skills are responses to audio- or video-recordings. It can be described as semi-direct method because students respond to audio/video-recorded stimuli. It should promote reliability and it is economical because many students can be examined at the same time. A drawback of this format is its inflexibility (pp. 119-123).

Planning and Structuring Oral Testing

Hughes (2003) describes what testing – its planning and its structure – should look like. First of all, an oral test ought to be as long as is feasible. The length of the testing needs to be derived from particular kind of test. Next, the test must be carefully planned. There has to be certain pattern of the exam which the tester follows. Subsequently, the examinee should be given as many fresh starts as possible. This means that it is better if parts of a test are separate or done in a different format. The student may also interact with more than just one examiner during the test. This leads to another point – it is helpful to have a second tester present at an oral exam as it may be difficult to conduct an interview.

Furthermore, only such topics that would not cause any troubles to the examinee in their native language should be used within oral testing. Also, the environment needs to be calm with good acoustics and the testers should be pleasant and nice not to stress the examinees even more. The tests should always be relevant, too. Interviewers must be selected carefully and they need to be trained. They should not talk too much during the exams and should give enough talking time to the testees (pp. 124-126).

III. METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research used for the purpose of this thesis. It shows the research methods, describes the tools used for obtaining data important for the research. Research questions are involved in this chapter. It explains the objectives of the research and deals with the subjects of the research, too. It describes the research instrument – the observation sheets - in detail and it also deals with the process of observing classes.

Introduction to the Research

As the title of this thesis indicates, finding appropriate criteria for designing effective conversational lessons is the main focus of this work. Therefore, the research deals with effectiveness of speaking-based activities, too. It looks closely onto speaking lessons and how well the activities used within particular lessons develop students´ speaking skills; it discusses the effectiveness of particular lessons. Furthermore, it describes all conversation-based activities in detail with regard to students´ engagement. In order to accomplish the research, three research questions were established:

- What types of activities were used within the observed conversational classes?
- Which of the speaking-based activities were effective (i.e. engaging, making students use L2) and which of them were not?
- What other elements made the conversational lessons effective?

Research Methods and Characteristics

The research was done through lesson observations, which were noted down into observation sheets. Five lessons were closely observed during the research. All of the lessons were conversation-based. The observations took place in a class of second-year students (i.e. 16 or 17 years old pupils on pre-intermediate level) at a grammar school in Pilsen, at Masarykovo gymnázium. The students as well as the teacher were the main subjects of the research. The teacher was a native speaker of English with no pedagogical qualification but with more than 5 years of teaching practise. Everybody - the teacher and

the students - knew they were being observed and the pace of the lessons was disturbed in no way by the observations. The objective of the research was to find out if various methods, activities etc. (described in previous chapter – Theoretical Background) were used in speaking- focused lessons and what made activities effective and engaging for students. Moreover, other elements (i.e. seating arrangement, organization forms etc.) besides actual speaking-focused activities that could make conversational lessons more effective were taken into consideration and they were analysed.

Research Tools

All five lesson processes were noted down into observation sheets (see Appendix A). The sheets were created with the help of Harmer´s example of an observation sheet (Harmer, 2011, p.440). All five observation sheets are included in appendices of this thesis.

There are two parts of the observation sheet that were used for recording lesson procedures. The first one includes general information about the lessons such as date, time of the lesson, number of students present at each lesson with a distinction of male/female students, and their level of English. It also deals with lesson objectives – i.e. with the goals of the lessons. The objectives of the lessons were discussed with the teacher before every lesson. Next, materials and other equipment used within the lessons – textbooks, workbooks, copied materials etc. are noted down in the observation sheets. Organizational forms and seating arrangements are also described in the first part of the observation sheet.

The second part of the observation sheet describes the procedure of each lesson. It is focused on particular activities done during the lessons. It involves brief description of the activities, timing, students´ role (their behaviour and level of engagement in activities) and teacher´s role (his behaviour towards students and his actions). Various comments on the lesson procedures ate written in additional information column. These include usage of L1 and L2, organisation of the lessons as a whole, or any details important for the research.

Research Procedure

As it was stated above, the observation sheets were filled in during actual lessons. Moreover, a brief conversation with the teacher preceded the actual observation. The

teacher always explained what the lesson´s objectives were; what materials he was going to use and why. He also added some basic information about the students, about their level of English and also about relationships among the students. He described what they had already done in the previous lessons and what students should know and what may be new for them. He also mentioned what may be done in the following lessons.

The actual observation started when entering the classroom. The seating arrangement was noted down into the observation sheet, although it, in some cases, did not stay the same for the whole lesson. The lesson procedure was observed from the back of the classroom so as not to disturb the students or the teacher and their work. The lesson was in no way interrupted by the observation.

All observation sheets were filled in during the lessons, directly after or even within each part of the lesson. Timing was also noted down in accordance with the changes of activities done in the lessons. Teacher´s and students´ roles were observed very carefully and recorded into observation sheets as well. The only information added after the actual lesson was the additional information.

After each lesson, a short talk with the teacher followed. He always commented on the lesson procedure. He stated whether the objectives set before the lesson, were fulfilled or not. He usually explained his or students´ behaviour and added what his plans for the following lesson were.

All observed lessons were subsequently analysed regarding their effectiveness (i.e. the level of students´ activity, engagement and motivation) and features discussed in the theoretical chapter. Results of the research are presented in the following chapter.

IV. RESULTS

This chapter presents results of the research dealing with effectiveness of the observed conversational lessons. First, it introduces the results of individual lesson observations. Then, it deduces complex results of the whole research. Findings are summarized at the end of this section.

Results of Individual Lesson Observations

In this section, results of all lesson observations are introduced in detail. Lesson procedures are briefly described and the lessons are then analysed one after another. Consideration is taken onto particular speaking activities done within the lessons with regard to their effectiveness. Next, seating arrangements are presented with respect to their contribution to developing speaking-friendly atmosphere. Organization forms are also introduced regarding their influence on students´ engagement in lesson procedure. Furthermore, teacher´s role as well as students´ roles are discussed and analysed in this chapter. The amount of time spent on improving students´ speaking skills within every lesson is introduced clearly via graphs and further discussed. Information about individual lessons can be found in observation sheets attached to the thesis in Appendices B - F.

Lesson 1

The first observed conversational lesson included 17 students. It began with an introduction of the lesson plan done by the teacher. He explained in L2 what the lesson procedure was going to look like. This took about 5 minutes. A group of students was supposed to lead the lesson. They had a game prepared for the rest of the class. The class was divided into three groups and the game started. Five categories of questions were written on the blackboard and divided according to the level of difficulty. The categories were: music, British and American history, sport, literature and culture. Students were taking turns and answering questions in their small groups. For each correct answer the group got points. The group with the biggest amount of points won the game. This activity took about 30 minutes. At the end of the lesson, the teacher gave feedback to the

presenting students and concluded the lesson. The final part of the lesson took approximately 10 minutes.

Speaking Activities. Throughout the whole lesson, there was only one speaking activity. It was not very engaging for students because they had to wait for their turns to come and did not, therefore, have many opportunities to talk. Moreover, the activity did not allow students to comment on other pupils´ statements and no further discussion was possible. As the graph below shows, the percentage of time spent on a speaking-based activity seems very high. However, most of the time students were using L1 and not the target language.

Seating Arrangement and Organization Form. When considering the seating arrangement, it was not well chosen. Students were sitting in three rows of desks, which is not an appropriate arrangement for conversational lessons in general. Moreover, students were working in small groups and because of wrong seating conditions they were not able to cooperate effectively within the groups as they could not hear or even see each other properly.

On the other hand, the organization form was chosen correctly. Students worked in small groups, which is good for creating competitive atmosphere and it may even encourage students to speak. In this case though, only the competitive atmosphere was established. Students did not use their opportunity to speak in L2. They used mostly L1when talking in their groups.

Teacher´s and Students´ Roles. At the beginning of the lesson, the teacher introduced the lesson plan and handed leading of the lesson over to students appointed in advance. During the game activity, he was monitoring the class, trying to deal with students´ behaviour and he was helping students when it was necessary. He was not interfering too much into the course of the lesson which led into students´ low level of engagement. Students were not paying attention when it was not their turn to choose or answer a question. As it was mentioned above, they were mainly using L1 when communicating in their groups and the teacher did not intervene anyhow.

At the end of the game, the teacher gave brief feedback to the leading group. He shortly summarized what they did well and mentioned a few recurrent mistakes that

appeared during the activity. Nevertheless, he did not give any feedback to the rest of the class – to the students actually playing the game and answering questions. They only found out who the winner was but they did not get to know anything about their speaking skills. This may influence their further motivation for participating in other speaking activities organised by their classmates.

Summary of Lesson 1 Results. When summarizing the results of lesson 1 observation, it must be emphasized that even though the amount of time spent on a speaking activity seems very high (67%) according to Graph 1, the actual amount of time of students´ using L2 was quite low. They were mostly using L1 when they were communicating in their groups. They were only using L2 to choose and answer questions. The only group of students who practised speaking was the leading group. On the other hand, they only practised asking questions. The organization form was chosen well but the seating arrangement was not adjusted to the needs of the activity and it was not encouraging students to speak. The feedback given to students was not sufficient because they did not learn almost anything of how they did during the lesson. Considering all facts, lesson 1 was not very effective concerning students´ development of speaking skills.
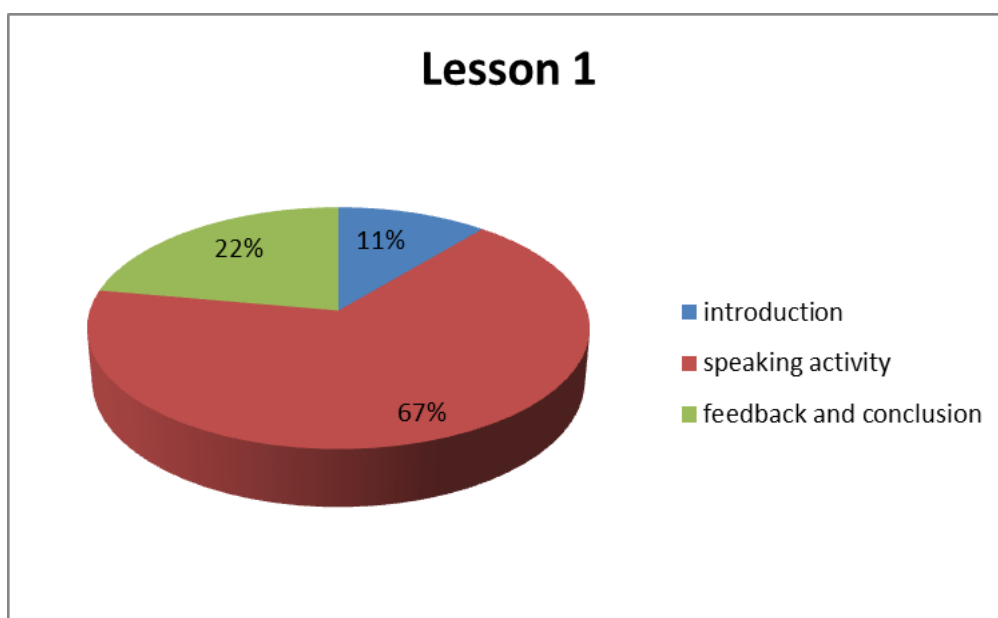
Graph 1. Parts of Lesson 1 expressed as percentage

Lesson 2

The second conversational lesson started with approximately a 5 minute introduction. The teacher introduced the lesson plan to the students. He only used L2 for explaining everything and students did not seem to have problems with that. There were 16 students in the class. Two students were appointed to present topics of their own choice. The topics were supposed to concern hobbies and interests. The first student´s presentation took about 10 minutes. She was talking about Japan, Japanese traditions and culture. She supported her speech by showing pictures of Japan. The rest of the class was supposed to listen to the girl talking and then create and ask questions. The questioning part took about 10 minutes as well but most of the questions were asked by the teacher. Students were unwilling to ask questions. They did not seem interested in any discussion. The teacher had to make a few students ask questions but without forcing them, students did not cooperate.

Next, the second student presented his chosen topic – basketball. He talked for approximately 10 minutes like the first student and then a discussion was supposed to follow as well. The teacher asked most of the questions again. Other students asked only about 4 questions and therefore the questioning part took only 5 minutes.

The lesson was concluded by announcing the topic of the following lesson. There was, unfortunately, no feedback given to either the presenting students, or to the rest of the class. The concluding part took less than 5 minutes.

Speaking Activities. During the second observed lesson, two speaking-based activities appeared. Both of them were based on students´ presentations and further class discussions. As the graph below depicts, speaking activities formed altogether 78% of the lesson. The remaining 22% of the lesson were filled with teacher´s introduction and conclusion. However high the percentage of time spent on speaking in the graph is, in reality, only the two presenting students used L2 and practised their speaking skills. For the rest of the class, this kind of conversational lesson was not very effective. They were mostly just listening to the presentations of others and then only a short discussion followed. Since the topics were not interesting for all of the students, they were not very engaged in the activity. The teacher asked most of the questions instead of letting the class do it, which was not very motivating for the students.

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Seating Arrangement and Organization Form. The seating arrangement was not appropriate for such speaking activities. Students were sitting in three rows of desks and therefore only the ones in the front desks were paying attention to what was going on in front of the blackboard. It would perhaps be more suitable to arrange the desks into a horseshoe shape so that everyone could easily see the presenter and would be able to communicate with others effortlessly. The organization form was neither excellent, nor bad. The class worked as a whole. It was good for the presentations – all students were listening to the presenter at the same time. On the other hand, when the time for asking questions came, nobody really wanted to ask anything. It may have been more interesting for the students if they had to create questions in pairs or small groups or even if they had been given a clear task prior to listening to the presentations. This way it might have been more engaging and motivating.

Teacher´s and Students´ Roles. Throughout the lesson, the teacher played a minor role. He began the lesson by talking about the lesson plan and topic of the lesson. During the speaking activities, he did not interfere much, he played a prompter role. Whenever the presenting student did not know what to say next, the teacher helped in some way. He either asked a simple question or suggested what might be mentioned next about particular topics.

He also helped with vocabulary when it was necessary. Furthermore, he was monitoring the class and students´ behaviour. Within the discussion part of the activities, he had to call on the students to make them create questions. He also asked most of the questions himself. As it was said above, it was not very motivating for the students. They did not, perhaps, feel the need to ask questions when they knew the teacher would do it for them. At the end of the lesson, the teacher only introduced the topic of the following lesson. Unfortunately, he did not fulfil his feedback provider role. There was no feedback either at the end of the lesson or at the end of the two presentations.

Students did not participate in the activities very much. Only some of them were listening to their classmates´ presentations. Consequently, they were not using L2 and they were not practising their speaking skills very sufficiently. Students who really practised their speaking abilities were just those two presenting ones.

Summary of Lesson 2 Results. To sum up, lesson 2 was not very effective regarding the practise of speaking skills. During the lesson, students (besides the presenting ones) were using L1 or they were just sitting quietly and listening. Even though the time given to speaking practise activities was large (78% of the lesson) students did not use this time effectively.

The seating arrangement was not well-chosen because students were sitting in three rows which does not encourage atmosphere suitable for discussion. Different seating arrangement might have improved the atmosphere and motivate students to talk more. As it was mentioned above, the horseshoe type of seating arrangement may be more appropriate for class discussions.

The teacher did not encourage students enough to take part in class discussions. He had to ask most of the questions himself, then. He also did not play his role of feedback provider at all. There was no feedback at the end or during the lesson.

Students were not engaged in the lesson. There may be various reasons for students´ unwillingness to speak: the topics of the presentations might not been interesting for the class, the wrong seating arrangement might have influenced the atmosphere in the classroom, the low level of teacher´s encouragement may have affected the pace of the lesson, the organization form (class work) may not have been appropriate for discussion activities because students may have been afraid to ask questions among their classmates.
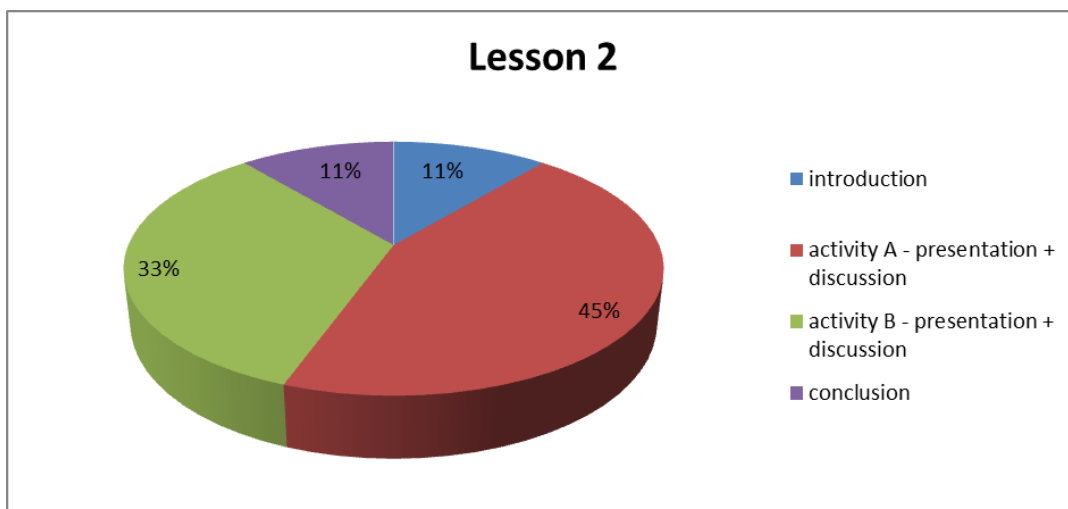
Graph 2. Parts of lesson 2 expressed as percentage

Lesson 3

The third observed lesson began with a lead-in activity. It took about 5 minutes and the purpose of it was to review vocabulary. The teacher reviewed names of colours according to materials students had received in previous lessons. In next 10 minutes, the teacher explained what he wanted students to do. He gave instructions in English and none of the 14 students present had any problems understanding them. Then he divided students into pairs by giving them numbers and then matching the numbers together. After that, the actual activity started. Students were supposed to prepare a detailed description of each other´s clothes using vocabulary they had learned in previous lessons. This whole speaking activity was, in fact, a preparation for the following lesson plan – a fashion show. Students were allowed to use dictionaries or materials they had received from the teacher before. The activity took approximately 25 minutes, which was too long. Some students finished their descriptions in 10 or 15 minutes and then started talking in L1. The lesson ended with a conclusion. The teacher explained that they were going to have a fashion show the following week where they would use their prepared descriptions. There was no feedback at the end of the lesson again.

Speaking Activities. A speaking activity comprised a major part of the third observed lesson. It formed about 56% of the lesson. In this case, the time spent on speaking was used quite effectively. Students were in pairs describing each other´s clothes including materials, colours, designs and even their own opinions towards the outfits. Most of the time they were using L2. Nevertheless, the activity took too long and that is the reason why some of the students switched into L1 and talked about topics of their own interest.

Seating Arrangement and Organization Form. The seating arrangement was not special in any way. Students were sitting in three rows of desks. Concerning organization form, students were working in pairs (established by the teacher). These conditions created pleasant atmosphere for the speaking activity. Students were not afraid to use L2 in their pairs. They felt confident.

Teacher´s and Students´ Role. During the speaking activity, the teacher was monitoring the class. He was walking around the class and helping students when they needed. He was not interrupting their work; he only interfered when students asked for it. He did not give them any feedback at the end of the lesson, though. He only concluded the lesson and introduced the plan for the following lesson.

Students were not cooperating at the beginning of the lesson when the teacher was reviewing vocabulary with them. They became a bit more active while they were working in pairs and describing their outfits. They were using L2 until they finished the activity or became bored. Then, L1 prevailed.

Summary of Lesson 3 Results. In summary, lesson 3 was quite effective with respect to practising and developing students´ conversational skills. The speaking activity was motivating and engaging for the students but it was too long for them. It took about 25 minutes (56% of the lesson). Some of the students did not need so much time and therefore became bored and started using L1. The seating arrangement and organization form were fine considering the pleasant environment created in the classroom. Students did what they were supposed to do. The teacher could have been a little more active in encouraging the students to speak more. Or he could have prepared a back-up activity for students who finished their work faster than others. To conclude, the lesson was relatively effective; the students were actually using L2 but there could have been more than just one speaking activity.
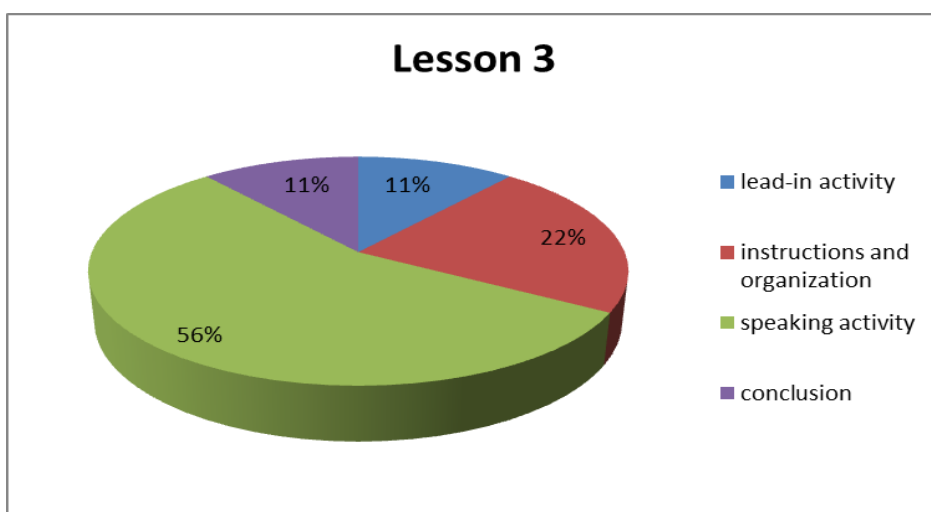
Graph 3. Individual parts of Lesson 3 expressed as percentage

Lesson 4

The teacher began the fourth observed lesson by giving instructions connected with the upcoming activity. Students had in pairs prepared descriptions of each other during the previous lesson. They got about 5 minutes to go through their preparations to remind themselves of what they had created and to practise the actual spoken descriptions. After that, there was a 30-minute speaking activity based on describing clothes. Students pretended to be models on a catwalk and talked about each other´s outfits. The last 5 minutes of the lesson were spent on teacher´s feedback to the students.

Speaking Activities. In this lesson, the speaking activity formed 67% of the whole lesson. Besides that, students had a chance to review vocabulary etc. before the activity and so they were able to practise using L2 even more. During the fashion show, all students spent approximately the same amount of time speaking because they took turns in describing the outfits of their classmates. They practised clothes-related vocabulary well and they even expressed their own opinions – likes and dislikes. This activity was motivating for students and everybody got involved in it. The only little disadvantage of this activity was the fact that students whose turn was already gone lost interest and started speaking Czech.

Seating Arrangement and Organization Form. The seating arrangement was very well thought-through. Desks were organized into two parallel rows with an aisle in the middle. The arrangement reminded of a real catwalk which encouraged students to get engage in the activity. Moreover, everyone could perfectly see and hear what was going on. Organization forms were also well-chosen. Students worked in pairs first while they were reviewing their descriptions. Then the class worked as a whole during the show.

Teacher´s and Students´ Roles. The teacher´s role was to give instructions to the students so that they would know what to do. Next, he monitored the students while they reviewed their presentations. Furthermore, he was in charge of the speaking activity. He took notes when students made some mistakes not to interrupt the atmosphere. At the end of the lesson, he fulfilled his role of a feedback provider when giving feedback to students.

He emphasized all strong sides of students´ descriptions and he mentioned some mistakes that were often repeated.

Students were playing their roles of models and fashion presenters perfectly. They seemed to enjoy the activity. Everyone got a chance to talk, which was effective concerning their speaking skills development. The only problem was that many students switched into L1 once they were finished with their presentation.

Summary of Lesson 4 Results. The fourth observed lesson was rather effective with regard to students´ language practise. They spent quite a lot of time speaking in L2 or at least listening to it (78% of the lesson when we include preparation for the speaking activity). The activity was well-chosen because it was engaging and interesting for the students. Everybody had a chance to talk during the activity. The fact that they worked in pairs at the beginning and had time to review their descriptions was also important because they did not have to be shy or afraid within the actual show. The seating arrangement was perfect for the purpose of the activity. Students seemed to enjoy it very much. It was also good that the teacher did not stop the activity whenever a mistake occurred and that he waited until the end of the lesson to talk about some mistakes students did. Nevertheless, some students were using L1 and not paying enough attention during the fashion show. This fact might have reduced the level of effectiveness of the lesson a little bit.
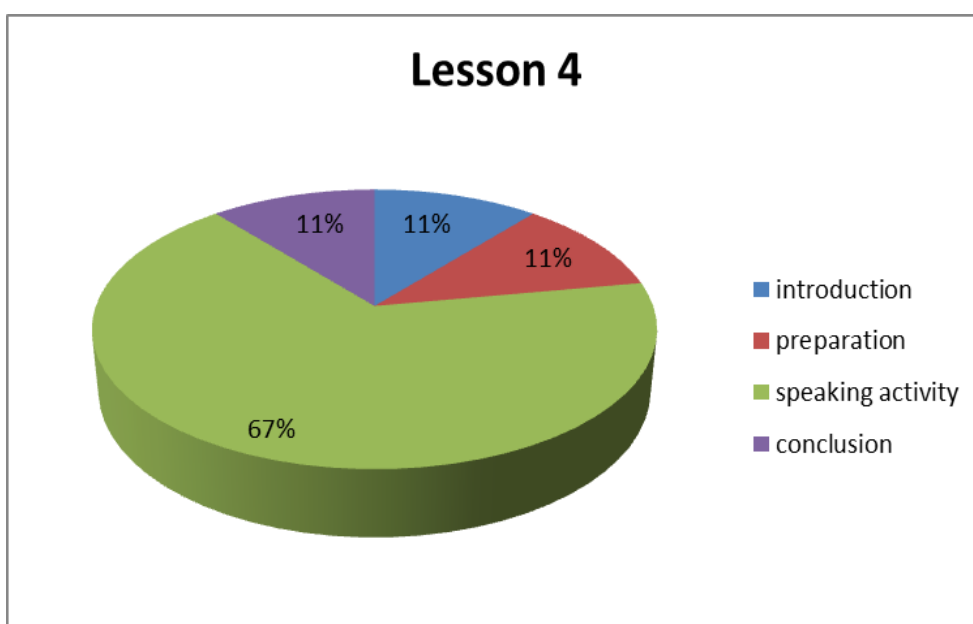
Graph 4. Parts of Lesson 4 expressed as percentage

Lesson 5

Lesson 5 started with an introduction of the lesson plan and re-organization of the seating arrangement. The initial part of the lesson took about 5 minutes (11% of the lesson). After this, a presentation prepared by one of the students followed. The presentation created approximately 44% of the lesson. During the presentation, the rest of the class was supposed to take notes. Then they had about 5 minutes to think about questions for the presenter. A class discussion came after and lasted about 13 minutes. Students were taking turns in asking questions. At the end of the lesson, a brief feedback was given to students by the teacher.

Speaking Activities. If we consider the presentation a speaking activity (activity A according to the graph), the fifth lesson consisted of 73% of time spent on speaking. However, the presentation was really a speaking practise only for one student. Other students were rather practising their listening skills. Speaking activity B – the class discussion – created 29% of the lesson and it involved all students. This activity was partially effective. Students were using L2 when asking questions but they often switched into L1 when talking among themselves. Moreover, there was a lot of speaking time for the presenter but less time for the rest of the students.

Seating Arrangement and Organization Form. Seating arrangement was appropriate for the activity. Desks were put into a horseshoe shape which enabled all students to see the presenter and to participate in a class discussion. Students worked as a whole class – which is again appropriate for class discussions. They worked individually only when they were creating questions for the presenter. They may have worked in pairs or small groups in this part of the lesson to be able to help each other with the questions.

Teacher´s and Students´ Roles. The teacher played a role of a participant of the class discussion. He asked questions but he also helped students with their questions and he corrected some of the mistakes the presenting student made. He fulfilled his role of a feedback provider only partially. He gave feedback to the presenting student but the other students were not provided any feedback at all.

Students were taking notes during the presentation of their classmate and then they prepared questions. They took turns in the class discussion by asking the questions. They did not seem very engaged in the activity because they often talked to each other using L1.

Summary of Lesson 5 Results. To summarize the results, it has to be admitted that rather a large amount of time (73% of the lesson) was spent on speaking activities. On the other hand, within the first activity, only the presenting student was really practising their oral skills. All the students took part in the second speaking activity of the lesson – a class discussion. Nevertheless, not all of the students got a chance to speak and some of them were even using L1 during the activity. The seating arrangement was appropriate for the purpose of the activity, though. It encouraged students to speak to the presenter and to listen to other students´ questions. A small error on the teacher´s side was made when he gave feedback only to the presenting student and not to the rest of the class.
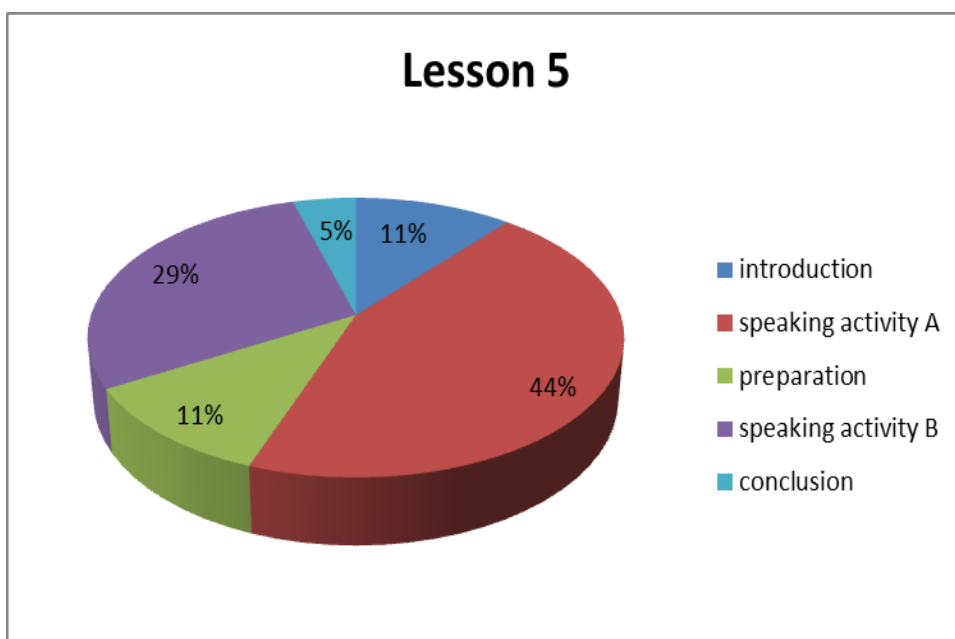
Graph 5. Individual parts of Lesson 5 expressed as percentage

Overall Results

Within the research, five conversational-based lessons were observed and every single one of them was different in some way. This section summarizes and puts together results of all five lesson observations. All lessons had their strengths and weaknesses which are also discussed in this part of the thesis.

Firstly, speaking activities and their level of effectiveness should be analysed. According to graphs provided in the previous section of this chapter, in general the amount of time spent on speaking-focused activities exceeds 50% of each lesson. However, the time was not always spent effectively. In some cases, students were actually using L2 but in some cases, like in Lesson 2, only students having presentations practised their speaking skills thoroughly. Perhaps the most effective lesson regarding the development of students´ speaking skills was Lesson 4. Students were using new vocabulary and phrases; they were speaking in L2 during the preparation and then took turns and use L2 within the actual activity (the fashion show) as well. On the other hand, the least effective lesson concerning practicing oral abilities was lesson 1. Students were passive most of the lesson. The activity was prepared by a group of students and only this small group used L2 when asking questions. The rest of the class did not have a chance to talk very much and if they did, they only said a word or two.

Secondly, the effect of the organization forms and seating arrangement on the lesson atmosphere is to be discussed. The seating arrangement was often a weak side of the lessons. Students were frequently sitting in three rows of desks which did not encourage speaking atmosphere much. Nevertheless, there were other kinds of seating arrangements, too – a horseshoe and two parallel lines of desks. These arrangements caused that students were more engaged and more motivated to speak than in those typical three rows of desks. Furthermore, different kinds of organization forms were used within the observed lesson. Students worked individually, in pairs, in small groups and as a whole class. Working in pairs seemed to be the most appropriate organization form for the students. In pairs, they were actually speaking and most of the speaking was done in L2.

Additionally, students´ and teacher´s roles were important features of the lessons. The teacher played various roles – a participant, a prompter, a feedback provider and an observer. As a participant, he took part in class discussions to help engage all students.

However, his participation sometimes had an opposite effect. Students did not want to get involved because they could see the teacher would say everything instead of them. As a prompter, he helped the activity go smoothly. He helped students with vocabulary; he asked convenient questions and he called on students to make them speak more. He did not fulfil his feedback provider role very sufficiently. Several times students were provided no feedback where it would have been appropriate. Consequently, students did not know what they did well and what mistakes they made. Students in most cases played roles the teacher established. Some of them tried what it is like to lead a lesson; some of them fulfilled roles of presenters. Moreover, they were participants of class discussions and activities. The biggest problem was that students were reluctant and did not want to cooperate with the teacher or with their classmates. They often switched from L2 into L1 or did not pay attention.

To summarize, the research questions could be answered as follows: Various speaking-focused activities were used within the observed lessons (e.g. presentations with further class discussions, game-like activity – a game called Categories, a role play activity – a fashion show etc.). The most effective activity was the fashion show because all students got engaged and all of them had approximately the same amount of time for speaking. On the other hand, the least effective activity was perhaps the game. Students did not get many opportunities to practise L2 and their verbal skills within this activity. Besides the individual activities, other elements helped create positive conditions for speaking – seating arrangement (e.g. horseshoe arrangement), organization forms (e.g. pair or group work), or the teacher himself helped the activities go smoothly and encouraged students to take part in discussions.

V. IMPLICATIONS

This chapter of the thesis covers three spheres – implications for language teaching, limitations of the research, and suggestions for further research. The first part concerns implications of the research results. It contains suggestions for improvement of the effectiveness of conversational lessons which result from the research. The second part deals with limitations of the research and propounds its amelioration. The final part outlines possibilities for further research.

Implications for Language Teaching

As the research has shown, not all of the observed lessons were very effective considering the development of students´ speaking skills. Teachers should bear in mind the fact that not all students are talkative by nature. Therefore, they should check whether every single student gets a chance to speak and not only those communicative ones. It happened during the observations that some of the students did not have to say more than a word or two for the whole lesson.

Furthermore, teachers should create or choose such speaking activities that encourage students to use the target language and they should support speaking-friendly atmosphere in class by selecting appropriate methods, seating arrangements and organization forms. It is obvious from the research that, for instance, the seating arrangement of three rows of desks is not very suitable for conversational lessons. Students cannot see and hear each other properly and they lose interest in participating in discussions. Organization forms should always be used in regard with a particular activity and needs of individual students. The research showed that sometimes students feel more confident to speak when they work in pairs or small groups because they do not feel judged by the rest of the class and the teacher so much. Of course, this depends on individual students, activities and lesson objectives.

Subsequently, feedback should always be provided to students. Without proper feedback, students lose their motivation because they do not know whether they have made progress or not. The students should know what mistakes they have made during their speeches, presentations etc. and they should know what they have done correctly, too.

Teachers should neither overlook all the mistakes nor correct every single one of them. If a teacher stops the lesson in order to correct every single mistake of each student, it ruins the atmosphere and discourages students from being active.

Next, the teacher should not overplay his or her role of a participant. He or she may take part in class discussions and help this way students conduct their speeches. Nevertheless, the teacher should not be the only person talking during the lesson. Sometimes, teachers want to fill moments of silence in their classes with their own speaking and then do not know when to stop talking. That is a mistake. It demotivates their students. In the observed lessons, it happened a few times that the teacher talked too much himself or was the only one who participated in a discussion. When this happened, students switched from L2 into L1 and lost interest in getting involved.

To briefly summarize, teachers should always put the needs of their students on the first place. Speaking activities should be appropriate for the students and should vary to keep students´ motivation on high level. Feedback is an important part of language learning process and therefore it should be given to students in conversational lessons as well as any other language-focused ones. Teachers should let the students use as much time out of the lesson as possible to actually practise their verbal skills.

Limitations of the Research

The research surely has its limitations and they are discussed in this section of the thesis. First of all, the research was conducted in one class only. The reason for this was to see how a teacher can manage creating different speaking-focused activities for every lesson and how the same students respond to various conversational lesson procedures. Nevertheless, if the research was done in more classes, the reliability of the research would increase.

Additionally, the lessons were observed and subsequently analysed by one person only. The factor of certain subjectivity must therefore be taken into consideration. The results of the research may have differed if it had been done by somebody else. If the research had been done and assessed by more people, the objectivity level would have been higher.

Last but not least, the low number of observed lessons may be considered a limitation of the research, too. If more lessons were observed and analysed, more speaking-based activities would be described, more seating arrangements and organization forms would be presented, more methods and materials would be used etc. It would again improve the reliability of the research.

Further Research

There are many possibilities how the research could be expanded or complemented, of course.

First, more lessons could be observed to see more speaking-based activities in practice. The development of students´ verbal skills could be analysed, too. Attention could even be focused on one particular student and his/her development could be recorded step by step. A questionnaire could be given to students in order to find out what activities they consider the most effective and engaging, what topics are the most interesting for them or, on contrary, what aspects ruin conversational lessons according to their opinions and experience.

Moreover, different kinds of schools could be visited in order to observe conversational lessons. The results of the observations could be compared and contrasted. The main differences of conversational lessons at different schools would be described, then. Lessons lead by different teachers could also be observed in order to see various teaching styles. The teaching styles could be compared again and the most effective one might be described in more details.

It might also be convenient to prepare various speaking-oriented lesson plans, teach them in a class and then compare the plans regarding their effectiveness. It would be interesting to use diverse methods, seating arrangements, organization forms, or tools to see what makes students engaged.

A similar research could also be done concerning other skills – i.e. reading, writing or listening. Lessons would then be observed with focus on a particular skill and its development within language learning process. Different methods, activities etc. used when practising a certain skill would be taken into consideration. It may be interesting to find out what skill is the most practised one in Czech schools.

To summarize, despite the fact that the research brings interesting results concerning speaking-oriented lessons and students´ level of engagement in them, there are many possible options for further research which would make the research more complex and would increase its reliability.

VI. CONCLUSION

As the title of this thesis indicates, the work deals with issues of designing effective conversational lessons. Many authors consider speaking one of the most important skills that should be developed in a language learning process. According to Ur (1999): "Of all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), speaking seems intuitively the most important; people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak " (p. 120).

Regarding the importance of speaking in language learning process, I tried to find out what makes conversational lessons effective. The theoretical background describes how crucial teaching speaking is. There are certain types of activities which improve students´ engagement in conversational lessons. Activities can be controlled, guided, or creative. Creative activities increase students´ level of motivation the most.

As it was said above, there are many activities that can be used within communication-based lessons. However, certain features make activities more effective. The main features are: most of the time of an activity spent on actual students´ speaking, even participation of all students and high level of motivation.

The main objective of the work was to find out what activities are used in conversational classes and what makes speaking-based activities effective. A research study was conducted in a secondary school - Masarykovo gymnázium - in Pilsen. Five conversational lessons were observed and the procedures noted down into observation sheets. The results of the observations were analysed, then. I found out that not all of the lessons were effective concerning a development of students´ verbal skills. The main weakness of the lessons was the fact that students´ participation in speaking activities was not even. The biggest strength was the teacher´s confidence in students and their ability to lead the lessons themselves.

Subsequently, possibilities for further research were introduced. I believe it would be interesting to observe more lessons in different kinds of schools and compare the results of the observations regarding the types of speaking activities used and their effectiveness. Comparing the amount of time spent on developing individual skills may also be worth exploring.

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APPENDIX A

Date, time	
School	
Class	
Number of students	
Age/Level of English	
Lesson goals/objectives	
Materials/equipment used	
Seating arrangements	
Organization forms	
Other	

Lesson Procedure

Timing	Activity	Teacher´s role	Students´ role	Additional information

APPENDIX B

Observation sheet – Lesson 1

Date, time	April 5th, 2013; 8:00 – 8:45
School	Masarykovo gymnázium, Plzeň
Class	2nd year
Number of students	17 (15 girls, 2 boys)
Age/Level of English	Pre-intermediate
Lesson goals/objectives	Students should be able to lead an English lesson (a group of students) + should be able to cooperate with others
Materials/equipment used	Blackboard
Seating arrangements	3 rows of desks
Organization forms	Group work
Other	

Timing	Activity	Teacher´s role	Students´ role	Additional information
5 min	Introduction of the lesson	Introducing the lesson plan	SS listening to the teacher, getting into the groups	Throughout the whole lesson, SS are using L1 in their small groups and L2 only for answering questions. The lesson is not well-organised.
30 min	Lesson prepared by a group of students – a game "Categories" – students choose questions according to 5 categories and amounts of points that are written on the blackboard; the categories are: music, history, sport, literature, culture	Listening to the students; monitoring the whole class and their behaviour; helping organising the activity; correcting questions and answers when necessary	Listening to their classmate, participating in the game, answering questions in small groups	
10 min	Conclusion of the lesson + feedback	Giving feedback to the presenting group	Announcing the winner group	

APPENDIX C

Observation sheets – Lesson 2

Date, time	April 9th, 2013; 10:05 – 10:50
School	Masarykovo gymnázium, Plzeň
Class	2nd year
Number of students	16 (15 girls, 1 boy)
Age/Level of English	Pre-intermediate
Lesson goals/objectives	Students should be able to give a speech about their hobbies and interests (2 students) + listen to speeches; lead a discussion; ask questions
Materials/equipment used	Visual materials
Seating arrangements	3 rows of desks
Organization forms	Class work
Other	

Timing	Activity	Teacher´s role	Students´ role	Additional information
5 min	Introduction of the lesson	Introducing the lesson plan	SS listening to the teacher	Throughout the whole lesson, only the two presenting students and the teacher are talking. Other students are forced to ask questions but they do not know what to ask. Most of them are just speaking in L1 to others and are not participating in class discussion. There is no feedback at the end of the lesson or at the end of individual presentations.
20 min	A topic presented by one student - Japan	Listening to the students; monitoring the whole class and their behaviour; helping organising the activity; correcting questions and answers when necessary	Only partially listening to their classmate, they are unable to ask questions and unwilling to participate in a discussion	
15 min	A topic presented by another student – basketball		Not paying attention, speaking in L1 to each other	
5 min	Conclusion of the lesson	Introducing the following lesson´s topic and lesson plan (different cultures)		

APPENDIX D

Observation sheet – Lesson 3

Date, time	May 24th, 2013; 8:00 – 8:45
School	Masarykovo gymnázium, Plzeň
Class	2nd year
Number of students	14 (12 girls, 2 boys)
Age/Level of English	Pre-intermediate
Lesson goals/objectives	Students should be able to describe each other´s clothes; use various vocabulary connected with fashion and be able to appraise different outfits using L2
Materials/equipment used	Handouts – names of colours and materials, dictionaries
Seating arrangements	3 rows of desks
Organization forms	Class discussion, pair work
Other	

Timing	Activity	Teacher´s role	Students´ role	Additional information
5 min	Lead-in activity: revision of vocabulary from previous lesson (colours)	Reviewing vocabulary by naming individual colours	SS are not cooperating, only listening to the teacher	There was only 1 speaking activity which the SS participated in and it took too long. Some of the SS were obviously bored after 10 or 15 minutes. The teacher spoke only in English (a native speaker). He explained what to do in detail but then only monitored the class, sometimes helped with vocabulary. There was no feedback at the end of the lesson.
10 min	Preparation for an activity: instructions, advice, organization	Giving instructions Dividing class into pairs (by giving SS numbers)	SS again only listening	
25 min	The actual activity: Preparation of a "fashion show"	Monitoring the SS Helping with vocabulary	Preparing a detailed description of partner´s outfit. Some of them are writing it down, some of them not. A few SS are using dictionaries, which is allowed.	
5 min	Conclusion of the lesson	Informing SS about a following lesson plan	Listening to the teacher	

APPENDIX E

Observation sheet – Lesson 4

Date, time	May 31st, 2013; 8:55 – 9:40
School	Masarykovo gymnázium, Plzeň
Class	2nd year (Septima)
Number of students	16 (14 girls, 2 boys)
Age/Level of English	Pre-intermediate
Lesson goals/objectives	Students should be able to describe various clothes and outfits in detail. They should be able to express their likes and dislikes towards clothes and fashion.
Materials/equipment used	Handouts – names of colours and materials
Seating arrangements	Desks in two parallel rows (in a shape of a catwalk)
Organization forms	Pair work, individual work
Other	

Timing	Activity	Teacher´s role	Students´ role	Additional information
5 min	Introduction of the lesson plan	Giving instructions and explaining what is going to happen	SS listening to instructions;	Throughout the whole lesson, SS are using L2 only at the beginning of the lesson when they are practising their descriptions and during their performance at the "fashion show". During the fashion show, only the presenting student is using L2, other students are talking in Czech or listening. The teacher is not interfering or disturbing the show, he is taking notes.
5 min	preparation for the actual activity	reviewing some crucial clothes vocabulary	In pairs practising their clothes descriptions	
30 min	The actual activity: "a fashion show"	Organising the activity; monitoring; writing notes about each student	SS individually describing other´s outfits (1 student is pretending to be a model, the other is describing clothes, colours, materials etc.)	
5 min	Conclusion of the lesson	Giving feedback to students. Telling each pair what they did well and what mistakes they did.	Listening to feedback	

APPENDIX F

Observation sheet – Lesson 5

Date, time	June 4th, 2013; 8:00 – 8:45
School	Masarykovo gymnázium, Plzeň
Class	2nd year
Number of students	16 (14 girls, 2 boys)
Age/Level of English	Pre-intermediate
Lesson goals/objectives	Students should be able to listen to a speech in English and take notes. They should be able to ask relevant questions and take part in a class discussion.
Materials/equipment used	Pictures, maps and other visual aids
Seating arrangements	Horseshoe arrangement
Organization forms	Class discussion, individual work
Other	

Timing	Activity	Teacher´s role	Students´ role	Additional information
5 min	Introduction of the lesson	Introducing the lesson plan, re-organising seating arrangement	SS listening to the teacher, helping with seating arrangement	Throughout the whole lesson, SS are using L2 only when asking questions, otherwise they are using L1 among themselves. The presenting student is only using L2. There is a lot of speaking time for the presenter but not so much for the others.
20 min	Student´s presentation of a town	Listening to the student; monitoring the whole class and their behaviour; taking notes	Listening to their classmate, taking notes and looking at visual materials brought by the presenting student	
5 min	Preparation of questions	Walking around the class, helping students if they need advice, observing their work	Working individually on their questions for the speaker	
13 min	Time for asking questions	Leading the discussion; correcting students´ questions; helping the presenter	Taking turns in asking questions and participating in a class discussion	
2 min	Conclusion of the lesson	Giving feedback to the presenter	Listening to the teacher	

SUMMARY IN CZECH

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá problematikou vytváření efektivních konverzačních hodin pro studenty středních škol. Teoretická část popisuje důležitost výuky konverzace ve vyučovacím procesu, zejména ve výuce jazykům. Tato kapitola představuje různé způsoby zvyšování efektivity konverzačně zaměřených hodin s ohledem na věkové zvláštnosti studentů. Rozmanité aktivity rozvíjející komunikační dovednosti jsou uvedeny v teoretické části práce. Praktická část zahrnuje výzkum, který je proveden skrze cílené pozorování konverzačních hodin. Tato pozorování jsou následně analyzována a výsledky jsou popsány v samostatné kapitole. Bylo zjištěno, že efektivita konverzačních hodin v praxi se od teorie liší v mnoha ohledech. Na konci práce jsou uvedeny návrhy na další možnosti výzkumu.