ELT Methods and Practices

Unit 7: Dealing with Speaking Skills

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Issues to be discussed in this unit

- The nature of real life communication.

- Differences between oral and written language.

- Understanding the nature of speaking: processing and reciprocity conditions.

- Characteristics of spoken language.

- Interaction skills.

- Types of speaking activities.

- Dealing with problems of fluency with learners.

The nature of real life communication

- We communicate because we want to or need to, NOT just to practise the language.

- Focus is on what we are communicating NOT on how we are communicating (ideas vs. language).

- The language that is used is VARIED in grammar and vocabulary, NOT made of a single structure or a few structures and NOT normally repeated over and over again.

Understanding the challenges of speaking (1/2)

What is involved in producing a conversational utterance?

Apart from being grammatical, the utterance must also be appropriate on very many levels at same time; it must conform to the speaker's aim, to the role relationships between interactants, to the setting, topic, linguistic context etc.

Understanding the challenges of speaking (2/2)

The speaker must also produce his utterance within severe constraints; he does not know in advance what will be said to him (and hence what his utterance will be a response to) yet, if the conversation is not to flag, he must respond extremely quickly. The rapid formulation of utterances which are simultaneously 'right' on several levels is central to the (spoken) communicative skill. (Johnson, 1981: 11)

Understanding the nature of speaking (1/2)

Differences between speaking and writing:

- Because the listener is in front of us, the speaker needs to take into account the listener and constantly monitor his/her reactions to check that the listener understands.

- The speaker needs to construct a comfortable interactive structure for the listener (e.g. make clear when he is giving up a turn or in monologue mark the point when he changes topic).

Understanding the nature of speaking (2/2)

Differences between speaking and writing:

- The speaker does not have the time the writer has to plan, so sentences are shorter and less complex and may contain grammatical and/or syntactical mistakes.

- Because the speaker is speaking in the here and now there is no precise record of what was said; thus there is a lot of recycling and repetition.

Conditions affecting speech (1/2)

Ordinary, spontaneous speech takes place under two conditions:

- **Processing conditions** (i.e. time): Speech takes place under the pressure of time. Time constraints have observable effects on spoken interaction. They affect planning, memory and production. The ability to master processing conditions of speech enables speakers to deal fluently with a given topic while being listened to.

Conditions affecting speech (2/2)

- **Reciprocity conditions** (i.e. interlocutors): Refer to the relation between the speaker and the listener in the process of speech. Because the listener is in front of us we have to take into account the listener and constantly monitor the listener's reactions to check that the assumptions we are making are shared and that the listener understands what we are saying.

Characteristics of spoken language

The pressure of time affects the language we use in two ways:

- speakers use devices to facilitate production.

- speakers use devices to compensate for difficulties.

Facilitation and compensation devices (1/3)

Facilitation:

1. **Simplified structure**: Use of coordinating conjunctions or no conjunction at all. Avoidance of complex noun groups with many adjectives; repetitions of same sentences adding further adjectives.

2. **Ellipsis**: Speakers omit parts of sentences.

Facilitation and compensation devices (2/3)

3. **Use of idiomatic, conventional expressions called formulaic.**

4. **Use of time creating devices** (fillers and hesitation devices): Common phrases or expressions that are learned and used as whole units rather than as individual words, for example, "How are you?" or "See you later" "by all means". These give the speaker time to formulate what he/she intends to say.

Facilitation and compensation devices (3/3)

Compensation:

1. Speakers frequently **correct** what they say, e.g. they may substitute a noun or an adjective for another.

2. Speakers use **false starts.**

3. They **repeat or rephrase** in order to give the listener time to understand and to remind him/her of things that were said. This helps reduce memory load and lighten planning load.

Find examples of facilitation and compensation devices (1/2)

Extract 1:

It's erm – an intersection of kind of two – a kind of crossroads – of a minor road going across a major road – and I was standing there – and there was this erm- kind of ordinary car – on the minor road- just looking to come out – onto the big road – and coming down towards him on the big road was a van –followed by a lorry – now- just as he started to come onto the main road –the van – no the lorry star-started to overtake the van – not having seen the fact that another car was coming out.

Find examples of facilitation and compensation devices (2/2)

Extract 2:

- **Teacher**: Morning Mrs. Williams. I've brought the money

- **Secretary**: Hello Mr James- erm- what money?

- **Teacher**: you know, the money for the books

- **Secretary**: The money for what books?

- **Teacher**: Oh, I thought Mrs Priors had told you about the reading books for the third years.

- **Secretary**: Oh yes, they've been ordered.

- **Teacher**: So where shall I put it?

- **Secretary**: What? ...oh over there on the filing cabinet...

Interaction skills (1/3)

Routines (information & interaction routines).

- **Management skills:**

  1. Openings.

  2. Turn-taking.

  3. Interrupting.

  4. Topic-shift.

  5. Adjacency pairs.

  6. Closings.

Interaction skills (2/3)

Some utterances (questions, invitations, apologies, compliments) require an immediate response/reaction from the listener. The utterance and the response is called an adjacency pair.

- Would you like to come for dinner on Friday?

- Yes, I'd love to. (preferred answers.)

- I'm terribly sorry but I can't. My brother is visiting us. (Dispreferred reaction).

Interaction skills (3/3)

Getting feedback from your listener:

  – Checking the interlocutor has understood.

  – Responding to requests for clarification.

  – Asking for the interlocutor's opinion.

- **Communication strategies** (used to prevent breakdowns in communication).

- **Function and meaning in conversation.**

- **Speaking styles.**

Information and interaction routines (1/2)

- These are conventional ways of presenting information. They are predictable and help ensure clarity.

- Information routines are frequently recurring types of information structure either expository (narration, description, instruction, comparison) or evaluative (explanation, justification, prediction, decision).

Information and interaction routines (2/2)

- Interaction routines are sequences of kinds of turns typically recurring in given situations (telephone conversation, job interview). These turns are organised in characteristic ways.

Communication strategies (1/2)

These are valuable for dealing with communication trouble spots (not knowing a word, not understanding the speaker). They enhance fluency and add to the efficiency of communication.

- **Message adjustment/avoidance**: Saying what you can say rather than what you want to say; altering or reducing the message, going off the point or completing avoiding it.

- **Paraphrase:** Describing or exemplifying the action/object whose name you do not know.

Communication strategies (2/2)

- **Approximation**: Using alternative terms which express the meaning of the target word as closely as possible or using all purpose words.

- **Appeals for help.**

- **Asking for repetition/clarification.**

- **Giving an interpretive summary:** Reformulating the speaker's message to check that you have understood correctly.

Speaking activities in the classroom (1/3)

- **Controlled activities** - accuracy based activities. Language is controlled by the teacher.

  - **Drilling**: choral and individual listening to and repetition of the teacher's mode of pronunciation.

Speaking activities in the classroom (2/3)

- **Guided activities:** accuracy based but a little more creative and productive. The output is still controlled by the teacher but the exact language isn't.

  - Model dialogues.

  - Guided role-play.

Speaking activities in the classroom (3/3)

- **Creative communication:** fluency based activities. The scenario is usually created by the teacher but the content of the language isn't.

  - Free role-plays.

  - Discussion.

  - Debates.

  - Simulations.

  - Communication game.

Problems of learners with speaking activities (1/3)

- **Inhibition.** Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom: worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism of loosing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts.

Problems of learners with speaking activities (2/3)

- **Nothing to say**. Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say: they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking.
- **Lack of interest in the topic.**
- **Previous learning experience.**
- **Cultural reasons.**

Problems of learners with speaking activities (3/3)

- **Low or uneven participation**. Only one participant can talk at a time if he or she is to be heard; and in a large group this means that each one will have only very little talking time. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.

What can the teacher do?

- The teacher must try to overcome these hurdles and encourage student interaction. The aim should be to create a comfortable atmosphere, where students are not afraid to speak or make mistakes, and enjoy communicating with the teacher and their fellow students.

Techniques to encourage interaction

- Pair-work.

- Group-work.

- Plenty of controlled and guided practice before fluency activities.

- Create a desire and need to communicate.

- Change classroom dynamics.

- Careful planning.

- With certain activities you may need to allow students   time to think about what they are going to say.

Using group work to promote interaction

- Group work may increase amount of learner talk in a limited period of time

- It lowers the inhibition of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class

- Group work means the teacher cannot supervise all learner speech but they learn from each other and develop collaboration skills.

Facilitate speaking activities: easy language

- Base the activity on easy language:
  - 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 the minimum of hesitation.

  - It is good idea to teach or review essential vocabulary before the activity starts.

More suggestions to facilitate speaking

- Make a careful **choice of topic** and task to stimulate interest. On the whole, the clearer the purpose of the discussion the more motivated participants will be.

- Give instruction or training in **discussion skills**. If the task is based on group discussion then include instructions about participation when introducing it. For example, tell learners to make sure that everyone in the group contributes to the discussion; appoint a chairperson to each group who will regulate participation.

- Give students incentives to **use the target language** and not resort to their mother tongue.

Characteristics of effective speaking activities (1/2)

- **Learners talk a lot**. As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk. This may seem obvious, but often most time is taken up with teacher talk or pauses.

- **Participation is even**. Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants: all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.

Characteristics of effective speaking activities (2/2)

- **Motivation is high**. Learners are eager to speak: because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.

- **Language is of an acceptable level**. Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.

Choosing topic based activities (1/2)

- A good topic is one which learners can relate to using ideas from their own experience and knowledge.

- The topic should also represent a genuine controversy, in which participants are likely to be fairly evenly divided.

Choosing topic based activities (2/2)

- Some questions or suggested lines of thought can help to stimulate discussion, but not too many arguments for and against should be "fed" to the class in advance: leave room for their own initiative and originality.

- A topic-centred discussion can be done as a formal debate, where a motion is proposed and opposed by prepared speakers, discussed further by members of the group, and finally voted on by all.

Choosing task based activities (1/2)

- A task is essentially goal-oriented: it requires the group, or pair, to achieve an objective that is usually expressed by an observable result, such as brief notes or lists, a rearrangement of jumbled items, a drawing, a spoken summary.

Choosing task based activities (2/2)

- This result of a task should be attainable only by interaction between participants: so within the definition of the task you often find instructions such as "reach a consensus", or "find out everyone's opinion".

- A task is often enhanced if there is some kind of visual focus to base the talking on: a picture, a graph, a map, etc.

Examples of speaking activities: Describing pictures (1/2)

- Each group has a picture which all its members can see.

- They have two minutes to say as many sentences as they can that describe it.

- A "secretary" marks a tick on a piece of paper representing each sentence.

- At the end of the two minutes, groups report how many ticks they have.

Examples of speaking activities: Describing pictures (2/2)

- They then repeat this exercise with the second picture, trying to get more ticks than the first time.

- A simple but surprisingly productive activity for beginner classes. Make sure participants understand that it is only necessary for the secretary to put a tick for each contribution; some tend to assume that every sentence has to be written out – but this cuts down drastically the amount of talk possible. The second time round, with a new picture, the groups almost invariably break their previous record.

Picture differences (1/2)

- The students are in pairs.

- Each member of the pair has a different picture (either A or B).

- Without showing each other their pictures, they have to find out what the differences are between them (there are 10).

Picture differences (2/2)

- A well-known activity which usually produces plenty of purposeful question-and-answer exchanges. The vocabulary needed is specific and fairly predictable; make sure it is known in advance, writing up new words on the board, though you may find you have to add to the list as the activity is going on. 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! You may also need to drop hints to pairs that are "stuck".

Solving a problem (1/4)

- Students are told that they are an educational advisory committee, which has to advise the principal of a school on problems with students. What would they advise with regard to the problem below? They should discuss their recommendation and write it out in the form of a letter to the principal.

Solving a problem (2/4)

The problem: Benny, the only child of rich parents, is in the 7th Grade (aged 13). He is unpopular with both children and teachers. He likes to attach himself to other members of the class, looking for attention, and doesn't seem to realize they don't want him. He likes to express his opinions, in class and out of it, but his ideas are often silly, and laughed at.

Solving a problem (3/4)

He has had bad breath. Last Thursday his classmates got annoyed and told him straight that they didn't want him around; next lesson a teacher scolded him sharply in front of the class. Later he was found crying in the toilet saying he wanted to die. He was taken and has not been back to school since (a week).

Solving a problem (4/4)

- This is particularly suitable for adolescents and is intended for fairly advanced learners. It 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. At the feedback stage, the resulting letters can be read aloud: this often produces further discussion.

Role-play (1/2)

Role play is used to refer to all sorts of activities where learners imagine themselves in a situation outside the classroom, sometimes playing the role of someone other than themselves, and using language appropriate to this new context. The term can also be used in a narrower sense, to denote only those activities where each learner is allotted a specific character role.

Role-play (2/2)

An example: Participants are given a situation plus problem or task, as in simulations; but they also allotted individual roles, which may be written out on cards.

- Role Card A: You are a customer in a cake shop. You want a birthday cake for a friend. He or she is very fond of chocolate.

- Role Card B: You are a shop assistant in a cake shop. You have many kinds of cake, but not chocolate cake.

Dialogues (1/3)

- Learners can be asked to perform dialogues in different ways:

    - in different moods (sad, happy, irritated, bored, for example).

    - in different role-relationships (a parent and child, wife and husband, wheelchair patient and nurse, etc.).

Dialogues (2/3)

- Then the actual words of the text can be varied: other ideas substituted (by teacher or learners) for "shopping" or "it's stopped raining", and the situation and the rest of the dialogue adapted accordingly.

- Finally, the learners can suggest a continuation: two (or more) additional utterances which carry the action further.

Dialogues (3/3)

- Particularly for beginners or the less confident, the dialogue is a good way to get learners to practice saying target language utterances without hesitation and within a wide variety of contexts; and learning by heart increases the learner's vocabulary of ready-made combinations of words or "formulae".

Simulations (1/2)

- In simulations the individual participants speak and react as themselves, but the group role, situation and task they are given is an imaginary one. For example:

  – You are the managing committee of a special school for blind children. You want to organize a summer camp for the children, but your school budget is insufficient. Decide how you might raise the money.

Simulations (2/2)

- They usually work in small groups, with no audience.

- For learners who feel self-conscious about acting someone else, this type of activity is less demanding. But most such discussions do not usually allow much latitude for the use of language to express different emotions or relationships between speakers, or to use "interactive" speech.

Types of oral interaction activities

- Games.

- Discovering differences.

- Information sharing.

- Reaching a consensus.

- Problem-solving.

- Interpersonal exchanges.

- Putting pictures in order.

- Picture interpretation.

- Group discussions/ debates.

- Role play.

- Simulation.

Guidelines for a free/creative speaking activity

Before the lesson:

- Decide on your aims: what you want to do and why.

- Try to predict any problems the students might have.

- Work out how long the activity will take and tailor to the time available.

- Prepare any necessary materials.

- Work out your instructions.

During the activity (1/2)

- Try to arouse the students' interest through relating the topic to the students' interests and experience.

- Leave any structure or vocabulary students may need on the board for reference.

- Make sure that students know the aim of the activity by giving clear instruction and checking understanding.

- Make sure students have enough time to prepare.

During the activity (2/2)

- Make the activity more a 'process' rather than a 'product'.

- Monitor the activity with no interruption except to provide help and encouragement if necessary.

- Evaluate the activity and the students' performance to give feedback.

- Wait until after the activity has finished before correcting.

After the activity

- Provide feedback.

- Include how well the class communicated. Focus more on what they were able to do rather than on what they couldn't do.

- Sometimes you can record the activity for discussion afterwards. Focus more on the possible improvements rather than the mistakes.

- Note down repeated mistakes and group correct. Individual mistakes are corrected individually.

References

Johnson, Keith (1981). Interaction: Some Background, Some key terms and some definitions, in: Keith Johnson-K. Morrow (ed.), *Communication in Classroom*. London Longman, 1-12.

End of Unit

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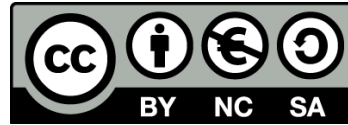
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