Conversational English: Teaching Spontaneity

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Abstract We need to make learners aware of the specific features of conversational English which make it different from standard pedagogic descriptions of the language. The problem is that many of these differences arise from the fact that conversational English is necessarily spontaneous. In conversation we have ways of holding the floor to allow us to pause for a moment. We constantly use checking devices to monitor the development of the discourse. We use appropriately 'vague language' when we do not have the time, the language or the wish for greater precision. Unfortunately there is a contradiction in the notion of teaching spontaneity. In this paper I will argue we need to do two things:

- we need to raise learners' awareness of the nature of conversational language and their understanding of why it is the way it is;
- we need a task-based methodology which will reproduce in the classroom the need for spontaneous production of language for a genuine communicative purpose.

Traditional methodologies which rely on isolating and practising features of grammar, lexis and pronunciation require learners to focus consciously on what they are doing—the very reverse of spontaneous production. And traditional methodologies tend to be prescriptive in a way that inhibits spontaneity. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why learners have such difficulty in moving from the classroom environment to using language freely outside the classroom.

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1 Introduction

Speech comes before writing. Infants begin by acquiring or creating dialogue—an overtly interactive system (Halliday 1975). They first learn to make demands so that their basic needs are met. Then they learn to socialise, to integrate with the society around them. Monologue comes later. We learn to tell stories, and to give extended and detailed instructions. And monologue eventually leads to writing. But the language that we learn naturally is the spoken language and that begins with spoken interaction.

Learning to write is a struggle. We not only have to learn a script and learn how it relates to spoken forms. We have to learn quite different ways of expressing ourselves. We have to learn a new grammar. And once we learn to write, we soon become over-educated and over-literate. We began to see written language as the norm. There is a good reason for this. The written language is static. It is there on the page available to be examined and analysed.

So our descriptions are descriptions of the written language. With one or two honourable exceptions, such as Brazil (1995) and Sinclair and Maurenen (2006), linguists tend to describe spoken language in terms of the written language. Written English is taken as the norm and spoken language as some kind of aberration. An unfortunate consequence of this is that language teachers find themselves trying to teach people to speak written English—I have done this myself as I will relate later on.

One of the difficulties with teaching and learning conversation is that learners have little idea what spontaneous spoken language looks like—or should I say sounds like. Unfortunately the same is often true of teachers. Even more unfortunately it is often true of applied linguists. At a recent conference, I attended a presentation by two people who were involved in the design of a language teaching program. The aim of the program was to enable teachers whose first language was Arabic to teach science and mathematics through the medium of English. The program was carefully thought out and structured. But one thing disturbed me. I did not know where the designers got their model of classroom language. As part of one activity students were given a number of classroom utterances and were asked to assign a function to them—were they a part of the social framework which surrounded the lesson ('Good morning everyone. It's nice to see you all')—or did they contribute to classroom management ('Okay I want you to open your books at page 29')—or were they instructional language giving the learners information about science and maths—('What is the square root of 64?'). This seemed to me to be a good way of raising awareness of the variety of language used in the classroom. One of the utterances was this:

> Use a magnet and put a tick in here if the object is magnetic, or here if it is not.

Now this is clearly meant to be the language of instruction, but I have doubts as to whether this was recorded in a classroom and indeed whether this is actually the kind of thing teachers say. And I have very serious doubts as to whether it is the

kind of thing *good* teachers say. My guess is that good teachers would produce something much more like this:

> Okay, I want you to use the magnet and I want you to see if the object is magnetic, and then I want you to put a tick here if it's magnetic, and I want you to put a tick here if it's not. Okay. Have you got that? Right.

Here you have some of the features of spontaneous interaction—repetition and checking moves. This is much more the kind of thing that would be produced in real time and—more important—it is the kind of thing that would be readily processed in real time, the kind of thing learners will find easy to understand. It is the kind of language that good teachers use.

Now, what is the point of this little anecdote? Well, we had two people working at a high level, both with a sophisticated knowledge of teaching and of language. But the examples they were using were not real examples of classroom language, and showed little understanding of the way spoken language really works. If our aim is to teach conversation effectively, there are three basic conditions.

- We must have a clear idea of what conversation is like.
- We must communicate this to our students.
- We must bring into the classroom samples of language which bear a real resemblance to spontaneous spoken language.

So I would like to start by looking at a story[1] and outlining some of the features of the telling that are typical of spontaneous speech. I will then go on to ask why most of these features are ignored in pedagogic grammars and teaching procedures. I will suggest ways of making learners aware of spontaneous speech and encouraging them to speak with freedom and spontaneity.

2 Features of Spoken Interaction

Before we look at the story, let me tell you how it was recorded. Back in the 1980s my wife, Jane, and I were commissioned to write a series of coursebooks for Collins. It was to be a task-based course. Once we had decided on what we were going to ask learners to do in the classroom, we collected together a group of native speakers and asked them to carry out the same tasks in a recording studio. This gave us samples of spontaneous language for use in the classroom. First, learners could attempt to use the language for themselves to achieve a given outcome. Then, they could listen to accomplished speakers of the language doing the same thing. This story is one of the recordings we made for use in the classroom.

> CB: I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't

[1] For a more detailed analysis of this story see Willis (2003).

> mind, because there's a barrier around you. But heights where you think you may be able to fall.
>
> BB: Yeah. I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere. But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says `Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.' I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet…
>
> CB: Yeah.
>
> BB:… with a rail about—perhaps eighteen inches high…
>
> CB: Mm.
>
> BB:… and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something. I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.

Let us look in detail at the first few lines:

> CB: I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind, because there's a barrier around you. But heights where you think you may be able to fall.

CB begins by announcing that he does not like heights. The rest of the turn is spent simply explaining and elaborating what he means by heights. Basically he takes over fifty words to say what could have been said in ten: 'I don't like heights where you are liable to fall'. Spoken language is wordy. Written language makes a virtue of brevity and precision, but spoken language is often wordy. This is not surprising—listeners need time to process the message. This wordiness affords them time.

There is a lot of repetition: the word 'heights', 'the top of', 'or something', 'possible to fall', able to fall'. The basic communicative technique is to add one piece of information to another so we have 'heights', then 'heights at the top of a mountain or a hill', then 'where it's possible to fall'. This is contrasted with 'the top of something like a lighthouse or something' and, finally, redefined as 'heights where you may be able to fall'.

What are the basic units of communication? The transcript is divided into four sentences in order to meet the conventions of the written form. But the second and fourth 'sentences' are not sentences according to traditional written grammar:

> Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall.

and:

> But heights where you think you may be able to fall.

So this transcript does not really work as written language. An alternative would be to transcribe the whole speech as a single sentence. But this would not work too well either. The unit *sentence* does not readily match the units of informal speech.

There are examples of what is known, unfortunately, as *vague language*:

I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind.

The two 'erms' are interesting. They seem to mark units of some kind. In the transcript they correspond to sentence breaks. 'Ums' and 'ahs' and 'erms' in speech are not random. They seem to correspond in some way to the punctuation we use in written language.

What about this?

the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind.

The structure here is topic—'the top of something like a lighthouse or something'—followed by comment—'I don't mind'. This differs from the unmarked SVO structure in written language ('I don't mind something like a lighthouse'.) The topic comment structure is very common in speech, but rare in writing.

Let us take a look at the rest of the story:

BB: Yeah. I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere. But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says `Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.' I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet…

CB: Yeah.

BB:… with a rail about—perhaps eighteen inches high…

CB: Mm.

BB:… and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something. I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.

BB begins by acknowledging CB's contribution with a 'yeah'. And we have a 'Yeah' and an 'Mm' from CB to signal interest and understanding. These are a vital part of interaction. If you doubt that, try withholding them next time you are in a conversation…

There is another example of the additive nature of spoken language:

I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere.

We have the rephrasing 'I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience' in 'until then I was okay'. The phrase 'I was okay' is then paraphrased as 'I could go anywhere'.

The language is held together by coordinating conjunctions 'and', 'and then', 'but'. The only subordinator is 'until'.

Notice how BB handles the turn-taking. She announces that she is embarking on a story: 'I was okay until I had a nasty experience'. This is not a possible interruption point. It says: 'Listen to me. I am going to tell you about my experience I am going to take a long turn'. At the end she says:

I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.

This announces the end of the story → 'Okay, I've finished my story. It's your turn now'. We do not have record of CB's next turn, but almost certainly it begins with an evaluation of BB's story—something like: 'Wow, yeah, that must have been really scary'.

Let us go on to list some of the features of spontaneous spoken interaction.

1. Conversation appears to be untidy.
2. It is made up of variable units—certainly not simply sentences.
3. It is additive—often with topic-comment structure.
4. It is often repetitive.
5. It is often vague.
6. It is overtly interactive.
7. It includes pauses and place holders.
8. It makes extensive use of discourse markers.
9. Exchanges are often formulaic.
10. Some speech acts are governed by routines.
11. Conversation is creative.

Most of these features we have illustrated already. The others we will demonstrate later. The overriding thing about spontaneous speech is that it is often wordy and, partly as a consequence of this, it looks messy. We are very much conditioned by our acquaintance with written language, with its precise sentences neatly divided with capital letters and full stops, with its carefully weighted subordination and its stylised avoidance of repetition. The first time we look at a transcript of spontaneous speech our first reaction is—'Well I'm glad I don't speak like that'. This was certainly the reaction of my students at Birmingham university in their first year course on the description of spoken English. One of their first assignments was to record—with permission of course—an interaction involving themselves and their friends and then to transcribe a short section. They were surprised to find that even they, highly educated and literate with A star grades in their A level English examinations, did not speak in sentences and did not use complex sentences with a plethora of subordinate clauses and that their discourse was punctuated with 'erm', 'yeah', 'like', 'you know' and with constant rephrasing and repetition. It was a salutary experience.

So we need to ask why is conversation structured the way it is?

1. Conversation is produced spontaneously in real time.
2. It is purposeful.
3. It is processed in real time.
4. Both participants are present and have speaking rights.
5. Participants take joint responsibility for the discourse.

The fact that conversation is *produced spontaneously* in real time accounts for the repetition and the additive nature of the grammar. We need time to build up the message. And this also allows for the fact that conversation must be processed in real time. It builds in the kind of redundancy which affords listeners the time to process out message. Conversation is *purposeful* and is shaped by the purposes

which it fulfils. For example, when an interaction is information-rich it is characterised, as we shall see, by checking moves on both sides. The speaker checks to see that the message has been understood, and receivers offer feedback to make sure they have understood the message. Because both participants have *speaking rights* and take joint responsibility for the discourse, they have to have ways of handling turn-taking, of holding and surrendering the floor.

It is pertinent to ask how often learners are asked to operate under these conditions in the classroom? Most classrooms are teacher-dominated. The teacher controls the discourse and takes responsibility for it. When learners are given speaking rights, they often operate under constraints which require them to demonstrate their control of the first conditional or the passive voice or whatever. If learners are to develop conversational skills they need to be involved in the classroom. They need to use the language for a real purpose. This is the basis of the thinking behind task-based language teaching and learning (see Willis and Willis 2006).

3 Introducing Spoken Language

The first thing we need to do is give learners an idea of the important features of spoken language. How do we do this? A good way and an interesting way is to record and transcribe a sample of their own language. Ask them to identify examples of repetition or vague language. Then, have them look at a sample of spoken English and ask them to identify the same phenomena. Then, whenever they listen to spoken English, you have an opportunity to ask them to pick out one or more features either from the spoken form or from the transcript.

Another useful way of highlighting the features of spoken language is by asking learners to rewrite it in different ways. We might, for example, ask them to rewrite a speech like this:

> I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind, because there's a barrier around you. But heights where you think you may be able to fall.

in less than fifteen words:

> I don't like heights where I feel frightened that I might fall.

… or in exactly eleven words:

> I don't like heights when there is a danger of falling.
>
> I hate heights when there is a real danger of falling.
>
> Heights where I feel I might fall always really frighten me.

… or in as few words as possible:[2]

> I don't like heights where I might fall (8 words).
>
> I hate heights where I might fall (7 words).

Then ask them to identify the changes they have made. We will now look at some individual features of spoken language.

3.1 Spoken Language Is Additive

Here is another sample of spoken discourse:

> So, the busiest day I've had recently was last Monday when I had to teach. I taught in three different schools. So, on Monday morning I taught in one school from nine-thirty. Then I went home and on the way home I had to do a lot of food shopping. Then I had lunch. I just had time to have lunch. Then I went out again. I went to another school on the other side of London, where I taught from four to six. Then I had half an hour to get from that school to another school in the centre of London for six-thirty to eight-thirty. Then I got home and I went out for supper afterwards with friends. So that was quite a busy day.

This was recorded in the way I have described, as teaching material. Learners were asked to describe a really busy day they had experienced recently. We asked a fluent speaker of English, in this case a native speaker, to do the same task. And this is what he produced.

This is a very good example of the way spoken language is additive. We have a series of actions and events strung together with 'and', 'and', and 'and then':

> So, the busiest day I've had recently was last Monday when I had to teach. I taught in three different schools. So, on Monday morning I taught in one school from nine thirty. *THEN* I went home *AND* on the way home I had to do a lot of food shopping. *THEN* I had lunch. I just had time to have lunch. *THEN* I went out again. I went to another school on the other side of London, where I taught from four to six. *THEN* I had half an hour to get from that school to another school in the centre of London for six-thirty to eight-thirty. *THEN* I got home *AND* I went out for supper afterwards with friends. So that was quite a busy day.

The question is how we should teach learners to produce this kind of language. The answer is that we do not need to. They will do this quite naturally. But we must be careful not to teach them to produce unnatural language. I remember early in my career teaching picture composition. There was a series of pictures depicting an accident. A boy on a bicycle in a hurry sped into a main road. A car was forced to swerve and in doing so rammed into a motor cycle unseating the rider and throwing him across the road. The learners really got into this story:

> Boy with bike he go very fast. And er he not stop and er car see him and car turn so not hit him and car hit man on bike and man on bike he fall and very bad and…

[2] One conference participant suggested a four word version: *Hate heights. Might fall.*

Of course I was not prepared to accept this. I gradually coaxed them into producing orally something like this:

> One day a young boy was riding his bicycle very fast. Unfortunately he did not stop at a road junction. As a result a car which was approaching the junction was unable to stop. At the same time a man was approaching on a motor cycle…

and so on and so on. Without realising it, I was trying to teach my learners to speak written English. Something which is quite unnatural and very difficult to do. I should have accepted their original spoken version and then perhaps worked with them later on a written version, with its measured connectives—'as a result', 'at the same time' and so on. The learners' natural spoken response was the right one. My attempt to teach them to speak written English was mistaken. It set unreal standards which even the best students would be unable to maintain. The lesson to be taken from this is allow for naturalness and spontaneity in the classroom. Do not try to teach people to speak English which is appropriate only to the written form.

Another good example of the way spoken language is additive, taken from the CANCODE corpus, is illustrated here:

> His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents bought him a Ford Cortina.

We can show learners how this works:

> Her neighbour's dog. → Her neighbour, his dog.

> His daughter's neighbour's dog. → His daughter, her neighbour, his dog.

And we can offer them other examples to work with:

> My cousin's wife →

> My cousin's wife's mother →

> My cousin's wife's mother's boss →

> My cousin's wife's mother's boss's brother →

An activity like this can be fun if we challenge learners to do it as a recall exercise. And there is also a more obvious grammatical spin-off—it is a fun way of focusing on possessive pronouns.

And it is not only possessive forms which behave in this way. I was recently involved in a conversation lamenting the way the traditional British pub is disappearing and being replaced by impersonal chains. One participant said this:

> The house we where we used to live, the house in Liverpool, the end of the street, the old pub, it's a Wetherspoon's now.

Another example:

> It's Rich Hall, that comic, you know, the American, we saw him at the Arts Centre last week.

Here again we might draw learners' attention to the features of spoken English by asking them to do a rewrite:

> There was a pub at the end of the street where we used to live in Liverpool, but it has become a Wetherspoon's.
>
> It's Rich Hall, the American comic we saw at the Arts Centre last week.

Again, we might go back to their own language and ask if that has similar additive devices.

3.2 Conversation is interactive

One of the things intermediate learners learn to do is give directions. Something like this:

> A: Can you tell me how to get to the post-office?
>
> B: Yes, of course. Go straight ahead for about fifty yards then turn right at the traffic lights and you'll see the church at the end of the street. Well, it's right opposite the church.

But that is not how people give directions. An exchange like this containing important information is likely to be something like this:

> A: Can you tell me how to get to the post-office?
>
> B: Yeah, sure. Do you know St. Martin's church?
>
> A: No, sorry. I'm not from round here.
>
> B: Okay, never mind. You see those traffic lights down there about fifty yards?
>
> A: Yeah.
>
> B: Right. Well you go to the lights and turn right.
>
> A: Turn right. Yeah.
>
> B: And you'll see the church at the end of the street.
>
> A: Okay.
>
> B: … and the post office is right opposite the church.
>
> A: Okay. That's, erm, that's right at the lights, then down the street opposite the church.
>
> B: That's it.
>
> A: Great. Thanks.

There are twelve turns here as opposed to the original three. There are several checking, monitoring and acknowledging moves. These are recurrent features of an interactive system. And they are very necessary features of a discourse in which the purpose is to transfer detailed information. A useful thing for learners to do is see

the short version and then listen to the long version. They might then be asked to recall checking, monitoring and acknowledging moves. Finally, they might be asked to rewrite the short version in a given number of turns—say twelve turns.

3.3 Conversation Is Evaluative

A consequence of the interactive nature of conversation is that it is often evaluative. We do not just listen to what others have to say, we engage with it in all kinds of ways. Very often we evaluate: 'That's great', 'Wow! That's amazing!', 'Good', 'Oh dear' and so on. We can offer learners frames:

A: Hey, I've just heard I've passed all my exams.

B: …

C: Poor old Jack. He's failed all his exams.

D: …

with possible completions:

All of them. That's awful.

That's great. Well done.

Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that.

Yeah? Well I'm not surprised.

Oh, wonderful.

Oh, that's terrible.

and ask them to say which completion is appropriate to which dialogue. We may begin by doing this with a recording and a transcript, and then go on to ask learners to work simply from a recording.

3.4 Conversation Is 'Vague'

Conversation is vague. Of course this is not strictly true. Conversation is as explicit as it needs to be. Look at this example:

A: How far is it to Edinburgh?

B: I don't know. *About* a hundred miles *I suppose*.

A: A hundred miles. Mm. How long does it take to get there?

B: Well, a couple of hours *or so*. It depends on the traffic. Yeah—*not more than* a couple of hours.

A: What does it look like?

B: Well, it's *sort of* brown*ish*. It's got *a handle thing* on the side and it's *about* the same size as a small*ish* suitcase.

We can usefully ask learners to identify examples of vague language here. We can also do this on an ongoing basis. Almost all texts, both spoken and written, exhibit this feature of language.

3.5 Discourse Markers

When Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) did their analysis of classroom discourse, they identified what they called *boundary markers*. When a teacher is about to change topic or shift the direction of the discourse she says 'Right' or 'Okay' or 'Good'. These are very important signals. Speakers exchanging complex information often start a turn with 'So…', which means a summary is coming up. The other speaker is invited to listen carefully and comment. Conversation is marked in this way with signals which help listeners interpret what they hear—signals which provide clues as to what's coming next. We call these *discourse markers*. What about 'Well' as a discourse marker?

WELL

You often use 'well' to show you have heard a question and are considering your answer. You often do this if you are unable to answer a question directly:

A: Who's that?

B: Well, it's not the manager.

You use 'well' to correct something you have said:

He's nearly seventy. Well, he must be over sixty.

I'm going home now. Well, in a few minutes.

You begin a sentence with 'well' to add a comment or to introduce a story you want to tell.

You know Mary Brown? Well, she's got a new job.

I went to George's last night. Well, there was nobody there so…

These definitions are slightly adapted from the COBUILD dictionary. That is one way into discourse markers. Modern corpus based dictionaries are very good on discourse markers. Look up 'well' or 'so' or 'right' and you will find this kind of information. But another good way is through the first language. How does Polish do these things? What do Polish teachers say to mark a stage in the lesson? What is the Polish equivalent of 'Well'? Discuss this with learners in class. Ask them to listen out for these things and report back next lesson.

3.6 Conversation Is Formulaic

Conversation is often formulaic. We have socially sanctioned ways of doing things. In English, for example, there is a one-move exchange with an optional response. So if I complete some minimal transaction, let us say I buy a newspaper, I will say 'Thanks' and that may be an end to it. If I do someone a big favour and they say 'Thanks' I would probably acknowledge with 'No, that's fine' or something like that. In Italian, however, the response 'Prego' is always required—even for a very small transaction. So different languages have different conventions governing different transactions.

We saw another example earlier. A storytelling turn usually begins with an identifiable phrase: 'I had an interesting experience…' or 'A funny thing happened to me…'. Moves like these announce the speaker's intention to take a long turn. At the end of the turn, they sign off with something like 'So that was a really frightening experience' or 'Yes, so I'll always remember that', meaning 'Thank you for listening. I have finished my long turn. The floor is open'. We need to highlight these conversational conventions in English and ask learners to compare them with conventions in their own language.

3.7 Conversation Is Creative

Last week we were visiting a place that I knew very well, near the village where I was born in the north east of England. We were planning a walk and my wife, Jane, was looking at a map. There was a cave marked *Jack's Scar Cave*. 'What's it like?', she asked. This was my reply:

> It's not a cave cave like you walk around it's a cave cave like a pothole.

Now there is no such thing as a 'cave cave' as far as I know. And purists might decry the utterance 'It's not a cave cave like you walk around' as ungrammatical. But it did what I wanted in the circumstances. Most people's idea of a cave is a big open space. When I said 'It's not a cave cave', I was saying 'It's not like your traditional notion of a cave' and I elaborated this by saying 'like you walk around'. Then I went on to say 'It's a cave cave like a pothole'. I suppose strictly speaking there is a contradiction here. With the second 'cave cave' implying again a traditional notion of 'caveness', I suppose the repetition is a sort of mini-joke. Then I went on to say 'like a pothole'. Potholes are thought of as narrow and slightly dangerous. In retrospect, I find it difficult to account for my spontaneous utterance. But it was received and understood. Jane acknowledged with 'Oh, right' or something like that.

Here are some more examples of creative language:

> Who is the orange juice seat?

We had a real conference night out.

Beware of the Bison.

Yeah …ish.

Can you account for them? The first might be heard at a dinner party when people are being asked to take their seats at the table. There is a glass of orange juice at one place so one of the guests asks 'Who is the orange juice seat?' The second example will be familiar to many perhaps most conference goers. It probably refers to a long and bibulous night. The third example 'Beware of the Bison' was Jane's final word to me before I left home to go to Poland. It was a warning. She has experience of Polish hospitality and the Polish liking for *Żubrowka*, the vodka with a bison on the label and a leaf of bison grass in the bottle. The third is something I first heard a few years ago. Someone was asked if a particular book was useful and replied 'Yeah …ish'. At the time, it seemed like a creative utterance, although it is commonplace now.

4 A Summary

I have listed some of the features of spontaneous speech and made some suggestions for how to raise learners' awareness of them. However, the important question is how far can we actually teach them. Well, some of them are like lexical items. You can list typical ways in which English expresses vague language—'sort of', 'and so on', 'kind of'. And it is important that learners become aware of these early on. But it is also important that teachers and learners are aware that these are inevitable and desirable elements in spoken English—and that they have their counterparts in spoken Polish. So it is partly a matter of teaching or listing vague expressions and it is partly a matter of raising awareness.

But how do learners practice vague language? You cannot say to them 'Okay, I want you to be vague' or 'I want you to use some vague language'. But if you create situations in the classroom where they are really talking to each other they will find that they need vague language and they will begin to incorporate into their speech. They may begin by importing first language expressions, but they will gradually increase their repertoire of vagueness.

The same applies to evaluation. As we saw above, you can introduce learners to typical ways of evaluating in English:

A: Hey, I've just heard I've passed all my exams.

B: …

C: Poor old Jack. He's failed all his exams.

D: …

All of them. That's awful.

That's great. Well done.

Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear that.

Yeah? Well I'm not surprised.

Oh, wonderful

Oh, that's terrible.

But you cannot say to them 'Okay, I want you to be evaluative'. The best you can do is provide activities in the classroom where they will need to evaluate one another's replies—where they will need to say 'Yeah', 'Right', 'Good' and so on. This will only happen if you provide them with opportunities to use language to exchange real meanings.

The same applies to discourse markers. You can't teach discourse markers by asking learners to listen to and repeat words and phrases like *'Well', 'Okay',* and *'A funny thing happened to me'*. The complicated thing about these markers is not their realisation—the four letter word *'well'* or the two letter word *so*—the difficult thing is how and when to use them. So an effective teaching strategy will combine awareness raising with opportunities for use. Again learners may well begin by using Polish equivalents, but with encouragement and feedback they will gradually become more English in their discourse markers.

So let me try to summarise by offering an overview of what I believe to be the pedagogic implications of this quick look at spontaneous spoken language:

1. Make sure learners (and teachers) are aware of the nature of spontaneous speech.
2. Do not try to teach learners to speak written English.
3. Identify and raise awareness of specific features of spontaneous speech.
4. Where possible show how these features are realised in English.
5. Create conditions for natural use in the classroom.

Teaching spontaneity is a contradiction in terms. We can encourage the awareness which leads to spontaneity but we cannot teach spontaneity. So here is a brief summary of the ways I have suggested of highlighting the features of spontaneous conversation to help learners begin to incorporate them in their own language:

1. Use native language comparisons to raise awareness:
   - transcribe and analyse spoken L1;
   - identify features of L1 and relate them to English (evaluations, discourse markers).
2. Identify and highlight features of spontaneous speech when they occur.
3. Rewrite spontaneous speech:
   - in corresponding written form, e.g. a letter;
   - in a set number of words.
4. Expand exchanges to include interactional features.
5. Tell the story behind an utterance: 'Who is the orange juice seat?'

5 Two Tentative Conclusions

1. *If we cannot teach learners to use vague language and discourse markers spontaneously, can we teach them to use the present perfect and the first conditional spontaneously?*

We cannot teach spontaneity in the use of pauses, rephrasing discourse markers, vague language and so on. The realisation of these features are simple: 'Well', 'Erm', 'Okay' and so on. What is difficult to describe and to learn is the way these features of language are used. The best thing we can do to help learners is build an awareness and offer them plenty of opportunities for language use so that they can gradually build these features into their utterances. So can we teach spontaneity in the use of the present perfect and the first conditional? Again the realisation of these items is simple and can easily be learned. It is the ability to use them spontaneously that is difficult to acquire. Perhaps an approach which emphasises awareness-raising and use rather than controlled practice might be the best way forward in teaching grammar as well.

2. *It may be the case that our models of English based on written language offer the wrong model for acquisition. We are asking learners to acquire something which is extremely difficult to acquire.*

This takes me back to my introduction. Written language is not acquired—it is learned consciously. The language that children learn from their mothers and other carers is spoken interaction. But the language that is presented and practised in the classroom is based on the written form. We, as teachers, seem to believe that grammar comes first and that from grammar we learn to interact. It is, however, possible—indeed I believe it is very probable—that the opposite happens. We first learn to interact and from that interaction we learn to build a grammar. This would suggest that we should first encourage learners to engage in meaning and then encourage them to analyse the ways in which meanings are realised. It suggests a classroom which is rich not in presentation and practice, but in language use and language analysis—the main components of task-based language learning.

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