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8. MATERIALS TO DEVELOP SPEAKING SKILL

INTRODUCTION

Speaking skills occupy a curious position in contemporary ELT. The importance of speaking skills appears obvious: the global spread of English along with improved communication systems provides economic, political, academic and social reasons for learning to speak English. The importance of speaking skills seems to be further underlined by the prevalence in many areas of the world of Communicative Language Teaching, a methodology which prioritises speaking.

However, despite the apparent priority accorded to speaking skills by contemporary methodologies, speaking skills have, until relatively recently, been under analysed in ELT, with the result that speaking skills syllabuses in ELT materials often amount to no more than a list of speaking activities e.g., role play or information gap. This contrasts with the other three skills (listening, reading and writing), where the syllabus often specifies the sub-skill which is being developed through a particular activity (Basturkmen, 2001) e.g., reading for gist or listening for detail. This situation with regard to speaking skills is all the more surprising given that considerable research into speaking skills *has* been conducted *outside* ELT circles. Hughes (2010, p. 212), for example notes that there is a wealth of research to which ELT specialists can refer when considering materials for developing speaking skills:

- Study of spoken corpora
- Conversation analysis, discourse analysis and pragmatics
- Work on affect and creativity
- Interactional linguistics
- Speech processing and psycholinguistics

Such research, however, Hughes (2010) points out, seems thus far to have made little impact on materials and, crucially for our purposes, little impact on teacher education. This gap between theory and practice in speaking skills, as Burns and Hill (2013, p. 231) point out, presents a challenge for teachers: "… The ELT field is now challenged as never before to ensure teachers have good professional knowledge of the skills involved in spoken communication, and of current ideas about teaching speaking effectively."

I hope that this chapter will make a contribution to closing the gap.

THE NATURE OF THE SPEAKING SKILL

In order to develop a principled approach to materials for speaking skills, we need an understanding of what the skill entails. It is a common misconception, for example, that if learners are using English words and sentences in the classroom, then they are developing speaking skills, even if they are only chanting grammar drills or reciting lists of vocabulary. To understand why this is a misconception, we need to consider the complexity of the speaking skill, as described, for example, by Burns and Hill (2013): Speaking is a complex mental process combining various cognitive skills, virtually simultaneously, and drawing on working memory of words and concepts, while self-monitoring.

The specific challenge of the speaking skill for learners is stressed by Hughes (2010, p. 208):

> … the demands of speech processing in real-time conversational and other speaking contexts place tremendous cognitive load on the second language user as they attempt to draw together the various elements from lexical retrieval to syntactic processing to the motor skills of speech articulation.

Speaking is a "complex mental process" because, as Levelt (1989) points out, it involves four separate sub-processes: conceptualisation; formulation; articulation and self-monitoring. *Conceptualisation* involves generating the content the speaker wishes to express; *formulation* entails selecting the language to express the content generated and organise it according to the norms of a particular genre; *articulation* is the physical production of the sounds required to encode the message. And while all this is going on, the speaker has to *self-monitor* the process to ensure that s/he is producing the intended message. In most situations, all these processes have to be carried out spontaneously and quickly to maintain the attention and comprehension of the interlocutor.

Having briefly considered the psycholinguistic challenge of speaking, we need to consider affective/emotional factors which can present a challenge to learners in the classroom. In speaking, more than in the other skills, learners are putting their personality on show and may fear embarrassment or mockery by their peers. This reluctance to speak may wrongly be interpreted as lack of motivation when, in reality, factors such as anxiety and inhibition are the real causes (Burns & Hill, 2013). The factors which make speaking a difficult skill are summed up by Hughes (2010, p. 207): "The complexities of speech production, how speaking is closely linked to identity, emotional states, and affective factors, and the way it differs from written language…"

ACCURACY, FLUENCY AND COMPLEXITY

A principled methodology for teaching speaking, then, needs to take into account the nature of the psycholinguistic and affective challenge the learners face. It is generally

recognised that there are three possible foci for speaking activities: accuracy, fluency and complexity. While accuracy is an obvious concept, fluency and complexity merit a little further discussion. In relation to fluency, McCarthy (2010) observes that key notions are speed/smoothness of delivery and automaticity (the ability to retrieve units of speech instantaneously): while these are not difficult notions in themselves, they are not always easy to assess. We should also note that McCarthy (2010, p. 1) adds a further *interactive* dimension to fluency: "Fluency undoubtedly involves a degree of automaticity and the ability quickly to retrieve ready-made chunks of language. However, fluency also involves the ability to create flow and smoothness across turn-boundaries and can be seen as an interactive phenomenon".

Complexity is defined by Ellis (2003, p. 340) as "the extent to which the language produced in performing a task is elaborate and varied". Learners may vary, for example, in the range and sophistication of the vocabulary, phrases and structures they use to carry out a speaking activity.

Accuracy, fluency and complexity are, then, valuable notions when designing or evaluating speaking activities. With learners who are not confident in speaking, for example, we may initially be content with fluency and so design activities which are well within their abilities and which allow them time to think about what they are going to say. After the activity, we will give feedback on the outcome, but probably correct very sparingly or not at all as our primary aim is to build confidence. Correction is a controversial area about which teachers have strong feelings: my own view is that there is a time and place for correction, but the wrong time is when learners are initially gaining confidence in speaking English in class.

When learners are more confident, we will aim for complexity. The complexity may come from the design of the activity: if, for example, you ask learners to describe an important decision they have made in their life, they will probably be motivated to want to express it precisely. Alternatively, the complexity may come in the feedback to the task when the teacher can ask learners for better (or at least alternative) ways of expressing something they said. A further way to encourage complexity is task repetition i.e. learners are given the same speaking activity to do again (though perhaps in a different pair or group or with a different audience). To take an anecdotal example, I once observed a teacher who asked her learners to discuss in pairs how they felt when they first came to England. She then switched the pairs and asked them to do the same task: when the learners repeated the task, the difference in animation and confidence was very evident. In this case I was only in a position to observe motivational benefits, but research, summarised by Goh (2007, p. 36) suggests there are also potential linguistic benefits to task repetition including:

• Greater fluency
• More idiomatic speech and lexical accuracy
• Better framing of narratives
• Greater grammatical accuracy in some tasks
• Greater language complexity

A focus on accuracy may come before the speaking task if the teacher gives controlled practice of vocabulary and structures essential to the activity; alternatively it may come after the activity when the teacher gives feedback on errors and, just as importantly, *good* examples of language use s/he has noted during the activity. Alternatively, the teacher in a large class might ask one or two of the pairs or groups to perform the activity "in public". Willis and Willis (2007) suggest that after a task, groups can be asked to prepare an oral report on the task, presenting the results of their discussion (if the activity has a clear outcome). At this stage, accuracy comes into the picture and the teacher can help the groups prepare the report and give feedback when they have presented the report.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

Our discussion of accuracy, fluency and complexity has revealed that we need to consider not only the speaking activity itself, but also how learners prepare for the activity and what happens after the activity. We can look now in more detail at how activities can be structured to be maximally productive. In so doing, we need to borrow some terminology from task-based learning, but this does not mean that we are committing ourselves to task-based methodology for all our teaching: we are appropriating ideas for a specific purpose i.e. the design of some of our classroom teaching materials.

Pre-Task Phase

Learners may at this stage be presented with essential vocabulary, phrases or grammar for the activity. As Goh (2007) argued, this kind of preparatory work can "ease the processing load" for learners. It should be noted, however, that it can be difficult for learners to integrate new language in the activity unless they have been given some prior practice of the items. Learners may also simply be given thinking time to work out what they are going to say and how they are going to say it. The specific benefits of pre-task planning according to Goh (2007, pp. 34–35) are:

• More complex content as a result of deeper interpretation of task demands
• More experimentation with complex or new forms to express complex ideas
• Better monitoring during task performance
• Greater fluency
• Improved accuracy in selected tasks

Task Phase

Learners carry out the task in groups. At this stage, depending on the size of the group, the teacher may circulate, helping learners who are stuck and/or making a note of interesting aspects of language use or of a few errors which might generate

an interesting teaching point. In some contexts, it may be possible for the teacher to record the activity.

Post-Task Phase

The focus here, as Goh (2007, p. 22) points out, is on "activities that can help learners notice grammar and pronunciation after they have completed fluency-oriented activities". As we noted above, learners can be asked to prepare an oral or written summary of the task or to perform the task in front of the class. This phase may involve the teacher giving feedback on language used during the activity. In my experience, learners really appreciate this phase, not least because it shows the teacher has actually been paying attention and not just leaving learners to their own devices! An alternative suggested by Burns and Hill (2013) is that learners analyse a transcript of their own performance of the speaking task and consider ways they could improve it. A further dimension can be added to this if learners are asked to compare their transcript with a transcript of native speakers doing the same task. Task repetition is an option the teacher can use at any point after the first performance of the activity.

The task-based cycle, however, is by no means the only way to structure speaking activities in the classroom. An interesting and rather different approach is suggested by Burns and Hill (2013, p. 246) who propose the use of L1 at preparatory stages (this, of course, assumes a monolingual group). The stages are presented below along with my comments:

- Presentation and analysis of authentic sequences of informal interaction in L1
  This is perhaps an unorthodox step but it can be useful to raise awareness that written and spoken language differ in L1 – it should then come as less of a shock that written and spoken language differ in L2 and so make learners more open to acquiring the typical vocabulary and grammar of spoken English.
- Discussion of familiar topics in L1 so realise what they do in L1
  This makes learners aware of their own L1 language use. When they hear themselves on recordings, many people are surprised by the language they actually use to express themselves and the way they transgress the rules of written grammar.
- Presentation of short authentic dialogues in L2 with transcripts to follow – discussion of transcript
  This raises awareness of the spoken grammar, vocabulary and discourse in L2. It opens learners' minds to the idea that native speakers do not speak in the same way as the coursebook dialogues.
- Present vocabulary and structures needed to discuss the same topic – controlled and free practice, looking at individual word pronunciation and phrase intonation
  The emphasis here is on giving the learners the tools to do the job. As noted above, they cannot be expected to integrate new language into the activity after

a superficial presentation. If the activity clearly requires new language (though it may not), then it needs to be practised. Pronunciation practice of language essential to the activity is often neglected, but it is vital for clarity and builds confidence.

- Work in groups and pairs and record conversations for later analysis
  As we noted above, this creates opportunities for the post-task phase.

A number of criteria for designing and evaluating speaking activities are suggested by Thornbury (2005): purposefulness; productivity; interaction; challenge; safety; authenticity. I would like to begin by discussing the "safety" criterion as this is so crucial in building confidence in both learners and teachers, especially if they are more used to non-communicative methodologies. The main way we can provide safety, I will argue, is by "scaffolding" our activities so that learners are prepared for the demands of the task.

Safety. There are a number of ways we can address the safety criterion through scaffolding:

1. Safety: progression from scripted to semi-scripted to unscripted dialogues.
   The dialogue reconstruction activities described step-by-step below illustrate this principle:

a. An open and shut case

- Pupils repeat the coursebook dialogue as a whole class.
- Pupils repeat the dialogue in pairs or threes (depending on the number of characters in the dialogue), with each pupil taking a role.
- Pupils change roles and repeat the dialogue again.
- Pupil A keeps his book open, but Pupil B closes his book. They repeat the dialogue with Pupil B working from memory.
- Pupil B keeps his book open, but Pupil A closes his book. They repeat the dialogue with Pupil A working from memory.
- Both pupils close their books and repeat the dialogue from memory.
- All pupils close their books and help the teacher to reconstruct the dialogue on the board from memory.

b. Disappearing dialogue

- The teacher writes the coursebook dialogue on the board.
- Pupils repeat the dialogues as a whole class.
- Pupils repeat the dialogue in pairs or threes (depending on the number of characters in the dialogue), with each pupil taking a role.
- The teacher rubs out some words of the dialogue. Pupils repeat the dialogue, working partly from memory.

- The teacher rubs out some more words from the dialogue. Pupils repeat the dialogue working mostly from memory.
- The teacher rubs out all the words of the dialogue. Pupils repeat the dialogue working completely from memory.
- The pupils help the teacher to rewrite the dialogue on the board.

c. Play the part

Example dialogue

Interviewer: Where do you work, Brian?
Brian: I work at Leeds Metropolitan University.
Interviewer: What do you do exactly?
Brian: I am responsible for research and materials development in the School of Languages.
Interviewer: How long have you been working there?
Brian: About 4 or 5 years.
Interviewer: Do you enjoy your job?
Brian: Yes, but I am always busy.

- Pupils practise the dialogue as a whole class.
- Pupils practise the dialogue in pairs.
- Pupils change roles and practise again.
- Partner A continues as the interviewer, but partner B gives his or her own answers to the questions (true or invented).
- Partner B continues as the interviewer, but partner A gives his or her own answers (true or invented).

d. Scripted to unscripted presentations

This follows the same principle as the activities above in that the scaffolding is gradually removed.

Stage 1   The learner delivers a short scripted presentation.
Stage 2   The learner writes down a limited number of key words and chunks (e.g., 12) from his/her presentations and delivers the presentation again.
Stage 3   The learner writes down an even more limited number of key words and chunks and delivers the presentation again.
Stage 4   The learner delivers the presentation totally unscripted.

It is, of course, not necessary to do all the stages of this sequence in one lesson.

2. Safety: work from the concrete/personal to the abstract/general.

Rather than throw the learners in at the deep end with a question such as, "What can we do to save the environment?" it is often useful to begin with concrete, personal questions e.g.:

Do you buy recycled items? How do you feel when you see people throw rubbish on the street? Does your car use lead-free petrol?

Once learners have begun to generate relevant language and ideas, they will probably be in a better position to address more general questions such as, 'Is pollution inevitable?'

3. Safety: use a stimulus e.g., video, reading, listening text or photo.

Such stimuli can be used to generate both ideas and specific vocabulary, phrases and grammar before the learners embark on the speaking activity. Comprehension questions for the texts can be designed to draw out the key ideas, concepts and language which will be needed for the discussion.

4. Safety: model the activity.

If you have a pair activity, rather than "throw learners in at the deep end", you can introduce it by performing first it with a student in front of the class and/or asking two of the stronger students to perform it for the class. These "open pair" activities set the parameters for the task so the class have a better idea of what is expected from them when they carry out the activity. Open pair activities are also a useful way of rounding up activities, particularly in a large class where it is impossible to give feedback to everyone.

Having considered what I have described as the crucial "safety" criterion, we turn now to Thornbury's (2005) other criteria for speaking activities (with my comments):

Productivity. Self-evidently we do not want activities where teachers do 95% of the talking and the learners are restricted to one-word answers, but this can and does happen in some classrooms. Activities need to be structured so that everyone has something to say and everyone has to say something.

Purposefulness. Learners need a reason to communicate. This can, for example, be provided by information gap activities where learners need to share information to complete the activity. This is commonly achieved through contrivances such as giving learners different parts of a shopping list or different parts of a train timetable so that they are required to exchange information. Though contrived, this is valid and useful practice, but we should not neglect the natural information gap: in every class learners may have different experiences, opinions, likes and dislikes which they can share. Learners' experiences and opinions are a rich resource for speaking activities which we need to exploit to the full. "Find someone who" activities are a popular way of exploiting this natural information gap e.g., learners are given a worksheet with questions such as:

Find someone who:

Likes football
Likes tennis

Likes chess

Etc.

They then have to circulate around the class asking questions until they have found a person for each question. This is a good example of an activity which is both tightly controlled and communicative, though it is more difficult to carry out in a large class.

Interactivity. Monologues are of limited value unless learners are, for example, practising making individual presentations. Learners need to learn to take turns, to negotiate meaning and to respond appropriately to what others say. We need, then, activities which require learners to speak, listen and respond and to 'fight for' a turn in the conversation. Problem-solving activities, role plays and group debates can encourage this kind of interaction.

Challenge. While we have stressed the vital importance of the safety criterion, once learners have gained confidence, activities need to stretch them a little if they are to gain from them. We can calibrate the level of challenge in relation to one or more of the following dimensions: linguistic; cognitive; psycholinguistic; affective. The level of the linguistic challenge will depend on the grammatical, lexical and discourse resources the learner needs to complete the task. The cognitive level relates to the topic: it is easier to discuss personal experiences than it is to discuss political issues, for example. We can vary the psycholinguistic challenge by adjusting the conditions under which the learners perform the task. Preparation time, time to complete the activity, interaction patterns and audience are all factors to consider when assessing the psycholinguistic level of challenge. In terms of the affective challenge, it is usually easier to have an informal conversation in pairs than, for example, to give an academic presentation to a group.

Authenticity. There is a place for speaking activities which require imagination in the classroom e.g., learners may be asked to role play an interview with a famous star, something they are unlikely to have to do in real life. Learners will need more practice, however, with the kinds of speaking activities they are likely to have to perform in L2 in the real world, even though this can be difficult to predict. As Hughes (2003: 54) has observed, at some point activities need to be designed so that learners are obliged to consider issues of "appropriacy in context and the role of social context in language choices", issues which, she observes are often completely ignored in resource books such as pair work activities.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have seen that there is a lot more involved in speaking skills than making noises in English. Speaking is a complex skill and our materials need to

reflect this: it is such a demanding skill that activities need to be designed to provide scaffolding for the learners so that they begin the activity with confidence. When designing activities, we need to consider where our priority lies in terms of accuracy, fluency and complexity at specific phases of the planned activity and how learners can best be prepared for each phase. In sum, we need to motivate learners to speak in English and give them the means to do it: not easy, but when it works, it is one of the best feelings in teaching.

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