Developing Classroom Speaking Activities; From Theory to Practice

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The mastery of speaking skills in English is a priority for many second or foreign language learners. Learners consequently often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how well they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency. Oral skills have hardly been neglected in EFL/ESL courses (witness the huge number of conversation and other speaking course books in the market) though how best to approach the teaching of oral skills has long been the focus of methodological debate. Teachers and textbooks make use of a variety of approaches, ranging from direct approaches focusing on specific features of oral interaction (e.g. turn-taking, topic management, questioning strategies) to indirect approaches which create conditions for oral interaction through group work, task work and other strategies (Richards 1990).

Advances in discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and corpus analysis in recent years have revealed a great deal about the nature of spoken discourse and how it differs from written discourse (McCarthy and Carter 1997). These differences reflect the different purposes for which spoken and written language are used. Jones (1996,12) comments:

> In speaking and listening we tend to be getting something done, exploring ideas, working out some aspect of the world, or simply being together. In writing we may be creating a record, committing events or moments to paper.

Research has also thrown considerable light on the complexity of spoken interaction in either a first or second language. Luoma (2004) for example, cites some of the following features of spoken discourse:

- Composed of idea units (conjoined short phrases and clauses)
- May be planned (e.g. a lecture) or unplanned (e.g. a conversation)
- Employs more vague or generic words than written language
- Employs fixed phrases, fillers and hesitation markers
- Contains slips and errors reflecting on-line processing
- Involved reciprocity (i.e. interactions are jointly constructed)
- Shows variation (e.g. between formal and casual speech), reflecting speaker roles, speaking purpose, and the context

In designing speaking activities or instructional materials for second or foreign language teaching it is also necessary to recognize the very different functions speaking performs in daily communication and the different purposes for which our students need speaking skills.

Functions of speaking

Numerous attempts have been made to classify the functions of speaking in human interaction. Brown and Yule (1983) made a useful distinction between the interactional functions of speaking (in which it serves to establish and maintain social relations), and the transactional functions (which focus on the exchange of information). In workshops with teachers and in designing my own materials I use an expanded three part version of Brown and Yule's framework (after Jones 1996 and Burns 1998): *talk as interaction*: *talk as transaction*: *talk as performance*. Each of these speech activities are quite distinct in terms of form and function and require different teaching approaches.

1. Talk as interaction

This refers to what we normally mean by "conversation" and describes interaction which serves a primarily social function. When people meet, they exchange greetings, engage in small talk and chit chat, recount recent experiences and so on because they wish to be friendly and to establish a comfortable zone of interaction with others. The focus is more on the speakers and how they wish to present themselves to each other than on the message. Such exchanges may be either casual or more formal depending on the circumstances and their nature has been well described by Brown and Yule (1983). The main features of talk as interaction can be summarized as follows:

- Has a primarily social function
- Reflects role relationships
- Reflects speaker's identity
- May be formal or casual
- Uses conversational conventions
- Reflect degrees of politeness
- Employs many generic words
- Uses conversational register
- Is jointly constructed

Some of the skills involved in using talk as interaction are:

- Opening and closing conversations
- Choosing topics
- Making small-talk
- Recounting personal incidents and experiences
- Turn-taking
- Using adjacency-pairs
- Interrupting
- Reacting to others

Examples of these kinds of talk are:

Chatting to an adjacent passenger during a plane flight (polite conversation that does not seek to develop the basis for future social contact)
Chatting to a school friend over coffee (casual conversation that serves to mark an ongoing friendship)
A student chatting to his or her professor while waiting for an elevator (polite conversation that reflects unequal power between the two participants)
Telling a friend about an amusing weekend experience, and hearing her or him recount a similar experience he or she once had (sharing personal recounts)

Mastering the art of talk as interaction is difficult and may not be a priority for all learners. However students who do need such skills and find them lacking report that they sometimes feel awkward and at a loss for words when they find themselves in situation that requires talk for interaction. They feel difficulty in presenting a good image of themselves and sometimes avoid situations which call for this kind of talk. This can be a disadvantage for some learners where the ability to use talk for conversation can be important.

2. Talk as transaction

This type of talk refers to situations where the focus is on what is said or done. The message is the central focus here and making oneself understood clearly and accurately, rather than the participants and how they interact socially with each other. In transactions,

> .... talk is associated with other activities. For example, students may be engaged in hand-on activities [e.g. in a science lesson] to explore concepts associated with floating and sinking. In this type of spoken language students and teachers usually focus on meaning or on talking their way to understanding.
> Jones 1996, 14

Burns distinguishes between two different types of talk as transaction. One is situations where the focus is on giving and receiving information and where the participants focus primarily on what is said or achieved (e.g. asking someone for the

time). Accuracy may not be a priority as long as information is successfully communicated or understood.

The second type are transactions which focus on obtaining goods or services, such as checking into a hotel.

Examples of these kinds of talk are:

Classroom group discussions and problem solving activities.
A class activity during which students design a poster.
Discussing needed repairs to a computer with a technician
Discussing sightseeing plans with a hotel clerk or tour guide
Making a telephone call to obtain flight information .
Asking someone for directions on the street.
Buying something in a shop
Ordering food from a menu in a restaurant.

The main features of talk as transaction are:

- It has a primarily information focus
- The main focus is the message and not the participants
- Participants employ communication strategies to make themselves understood
- There may be frequent questions, repetitions, and comprehension checks
- There may be negotiation and digression
- Linguistic accuracy is not always important

Some of the skills involved in using talk for transactions are:

- Explaining a need or intention
- Describing something
- Asking questioning
- Confirming information
- Justifying an opinion
- Making suggestions
- Clarifying understanding
- Making comparisons
- Agreeing and disagreeing

3. Talk as performance

The third type of talk which can usefully be distinguished has been called talk as performance. This refers to public talk, that is, talk which transmits information before an audience such as morning talks, public announcements, and speeches.

Spoken texts of this kind according to Jones (1996,14),

> ...often have identifiable generic structures and the language used is more predictable.
> ...Because of less contextual support, the speaker must include all necessary information in the text – hence the importance of topic as well as textual knowledge.
> And while meaning is still important, there will be more emphasis on form and accuracy.

Talk as performance tends to be in the form of monolog rather than dialog, often follows a recognizable format (e.g. a speech of welcome) and is closer to written language than conversational language. Similarly it is often evaluated according to its effectiveness or impact on the listener, something which is unlikely to happen with talk as interaction or transaction. Examples of talk as performance are:

Giving a class report about a school trip
Conducting a class debate
Giving a speech of welcome
Making a sales presentation
Giving a lecture

The main features of talk as performance are:

- There is a focus on both message and audience
- It reflects organization and sequencing
- Form and accuracy is important
- Language is more like written language
- It is often monologic

Some of the skills involved in using talk as performance are:

- Using an appropriate format
- Presenting information in an appropriate sequence
- Maintaining audience engagement
- Using correct pronunciation and grammar
- Creating an effect on the audience
- Using appropriate vocabulary
- Using appropriate opening and closing

Teachers sometimes describe interesting differences between how learners manage these three different kinds of talk, as the following anecdotes illustrate.

I sometimes find with my students at a university in Hong Kong, that they are good at talk as transaction and performance but not with talk as interaction. For example the other day one of my students did an excellent class presentation in a course for computer science majors, and described very effectively a new piece of computer software. However a few days later when I met the same student going home on the subway and tried to engage her in social chat, she was at a complete loss for words.

Another teacher describes a second language user with just the opposite difficulties. He is more comfortable with talk as interaction than as performance.

One of my colleagues in my university in China is quite comfortable using talk socially. If we have lunch together with other native speakers he is quite comfortable joking and chatting in English. However recently we did a presentation together at a conference and his performance was very different. His pronunciation became much more "Chinese" and he made quite a few grammatical and other errors that I hadn't heard him make before.

Implications for teaching

Three core issues need to be addressed in planning speaking activities for an oral English course. The first is to determine what kinds of speaking skills the course will focus on. Is it all three of the genres described above or will some receive greater attention than others. Informal needs analysis is the starting point here. Procedures for determining needs include observation of learners carrying out different kinds of communicative tasks, questionnaires, interviews, and diagnostic testing (e.g. Tsang and Wong 2002). The second issues is identifying teaching strategies to "teach" (i.e. provide opportunities for learners to acquire) each kind of talk.

Talk as interaction is perhaps the most difficult skill to teach since interactional talk is a very complex as well as subtle phenomena that takes place under the control of "unspoken" rules. In my experience these are best taught thought providing examples embedded in naturalistic dialogs that can serve to model features such as opening and closing conversations, making small talk, recounting personal incidents and experiences, and reacting to what others say. For example to practice reacting to what others say, students can be given a dialog in which listener reactions such as "really", "is that right", "wow", "that's interesting" have been omitted. Students work in pairs to add them to the dialog, practice the dialog with the reactions, then practice a different dialog, this time adding their own reactions. Another technique to practice using conversation starters and personal recounts involves giving conversation starters which students have to respond to by asking one or two follow-up questions. For example, "I didn't sleep very well last night". "Look what I bought on Sunday. How do you like it?" "Did that thunderstorm last night wake you?".

Talk as transaction is more easily planned since current communicative materials are a rich resource of group activities, information-gap activities and role plays that can

provide a source for practicing how to use talk for sharing and obtaining information as well as for carrying out real-world transactions. These activities include ranking activities, values clarification activities, brainstorming, and simulations. Group discussion activities can be initiated by having students work in groups to prepare a short list of controversial statements for others to think about. Groups exchange statements and discuss them. For example: "Schools should do away with exams". "Vegetarianism is the only healthy life style". "The Olympic games are a waste of money." Role-play activities are another familiar technique for practicing real world transactions and typically involve the following sequence of activities:

- Preparing: reviewing vocabulary, real world knowledge related to the content and context of the role play (e.g. returning a faulty item to a store)
- Modeling and eliciting: demonstrating the stages that are typically involved in the transaction, eliciting suggestions for how each stage can be carried out, and teaching the functional language need for each stage
- Practicing and reviewing: students are assigned roles and practice a role play using cue cards or realia to provide language and other support

Teaching talk as performance requires a different teaching strategy. Jones (1996, 17) comments:

> Initially talk as performance needs to be prepared for and scaffolded in much the same way as written text, and many of the teaching strategies used to make understandings of written text accessible can be applied to the formal uses of spoken language

This involves providing examples or models of speeches, oral presentations, stories etc through video or audio recordings or written examples. These are then analyzed or "deconstructed" in order to understand how such texts work and what their linguistic and other organizational features are. Questions such as the following guide this process:

- What is the speaker's purpose?
- Who is the audience?
- What kind of information does the audience expect?
- How does the talk begin, develop, and end? What moves or stages are involved?
- Is any special language used?

Students then work jointly on planning their own texts, which are then presented to the class.

The third issue involved in planning speaking activities is determining the expected level of performance on a speaking task and the criteria that will be used to assess

student performance. For any activity we use in class, whether it be one that seeks to develop proficiency in using talk as interaction, transaction, or performance, we need to consider what successful completion of the activity involves. Is accuracy of pronunciation and grammar important? Is each participant expected to speak for about the same amount of time? Is it acceptable if a speaker uses many long pauses and repetitions? If a speaker's contribution to a discussion is off topic, does it matter?

As the above questions illustrate, the type of criteria we use to assess a speaker's oral performance during a classroom activity will depend on what kind of talk we are talking about and the kind of classroom activity we are using. Green, Christopher and Lam (2002, 228) in a report on teaching discussion skills recommend assigning one student to serve as an observer during a discussion activity using the following observation form:

<center>Number of contributions</center>

Students:	A	B	C	D	E	F

1. Total number of contributions made
2. Responding supportively
3. Responding aggressively
4. Introducing a new (relevant) point
5. Digressing from the topic

A speaking activity that requires talk as performance, e.g. a mini-lecture, would require very different assessment criteria however. These might include:

- Clarity of presentation: i.e. the extent to which the speaker organizes information in an easily comprehensible order
- Use of discourse markers, repetition and stress to emphasize important points and to make the lecture structure more salient to the listeners

Different speaking activities such as conversations, group discussions, and speeches make different types of demands on learners. They require different kinds and levels of preparation and support and different criteria obviously have to be used in assessing how well students carry them out.

Conclusion

I will conclude with a set of questions I use to guide myself when preparing speaking activities for the classroom or in textbooks and which I use with teachers in workshops which focus on developing and reviewing classroom materials.

- What will the focus of the activity be: talk as interaction, transaction or performance?
- How will the activity be modeled?
- What stages will the activity be divided into?
- What language support will be needed?
- What resources will be needed?
- What learning arrangements will be needed?
- What level of performance is expected?
- How and when will feedback be given?

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