Chapter 16

Task Repetition as a Way of Enhancing Oral Communication in a Foreign Language

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Introduction

None of the language skills occupy such a peculiar position in language pedagogy as speech production. It seems justifiable to say that the ultimate goal of most endeavors aimed at learning a foreign language is to be able to speak fluently expressing the intended meaning with ease and confidence. Many teachers and learners would probably attest that the evaluation of one's command of a foreign language concerns, first and foremost, the appraisal of the ability to communicate. Thus, teaching how to speak turns out to be one of the biggest challenges teachers face. Not only do they need to equip their students with structures and lexical items, but also they teach ways of dealing with psychological limitations and inhibitions. Moreover, the impressive list of teachers' responsibilities comprises developing sociolinguistic competence to ensure effective communication and also teaching pronunciation, since not only the content but also the form of an utterance plays a role in the way the message is received. On the basis of speech sounds reaching our ears we tend to judge the speaker's personality, attitude, background or even status. We are also inclined to create and project the picture of ourselves onto others: changes of the tempo and intonation as well as pauses and modulation enable us to build the texture of the utterance which supports or enhances what we say (Luoma, 2004: 10). Realizing the complexity and demands inherent in developing oral fluency, teachers have long been trying to find new ways and techniques that could be employed with view to assisting learners in the painstaking task of learning how to speak. The account of an experiment conducted by the present author describes one such attempt.

Speech Production

In order to understand the mechanisms involved in developing speaking skills, it is useful to consider the nature and conditions of speech production. The theoretical framework in L2 speech production

research that most linguists refer to (cf. Bygate, 1996, 2001; Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2005, 2008; Hughes, 2002; Luoma, 2004) is the one proposed by Levelt (1989), which was originally meant for monolingual communication. Later, it was applied to the analysis of the speech of bilinguals and L2 learners by de Bot (1992) and Kormos (2006). Levelt (1989) believed that speech production can be described through the functioning of a number of relatively autonomous processes: conceptualization of the message, formulation of the language representation and articulation. At the level of conceptualization the speaker plans the content of the utterance by drawing from their knowledge of the world or the topic, the information about a specific situation or type of discourse or interaction. The message is still at the preverbal stage, but it contains all the data needed to convert it into language. The subsequent stage of formulation involves finding the words and phrases in the mental lexicon of the speaker. Each word consists of two types of data: *lemma*, containing information about the meaning and syntax, and *lexeme*, delineating its morphological and phonological profile. The process of retrieving of lexical items is thus connected with grammatical encoding, which leads to the origination of the *surface structure* – a string of lemmas composed of phrases of different kind. This, in turn, undergoes phonological encoding that results in a phonetic or articulatory plan, which Levelt calls *internal speech* (Ellis, 2005: 12). The mechanisms comprised in the third process – articulation – are responsible for converting chunks of internal speech into actual speech, which entails motor control of the speech apparatus. The three processes described above are regulated by ongoing self-monitoring that checks whether the information at the preverbal stage reflects the actual intentions of the speaker, controls the stage of grammatical and phonological encoding and inspects the final utterance originated in the course of the whole process. Since all these processes proceed simultaneously, the eventual success depends on the degree of their automaticity. Levelt (1989) pointed out that conceptualization and monitoring function under controlled processing, whereas formulation and articulation are mainly automatic.

De Bot (1992) employed Levelt's model to account for speech production in an L2 and pointed out that formulation is governed by two separate processing systems, L1 and L2 specific, whose independence does not exclude interconnections. Taking into account L1 interference in the production of L2 sounds, de Bot doubts there exist separate systems responsible for articulation (1992: 17). The processes of formulation and articulation may not engage L1 speakers' attention; however, L2 learners need to employ their conscious processors to accomplish the same goal, which not infrequently leads to problems in production. L2 learners find it exceedingly difficult to cope with the demands posed by the mechanisms involved in speech production on their working memory

(Ellis, 2005: 13). Given the tenets of Levelt's model, Ellis (2005: 14) concedes that 'rehearsal (...) may provide learners with an opportunity to attend to all three components (...) so it would seem reasonable to assume that this type of pre-task planning will lead to all-round improvements when that task is repeated, as found by Bygate (1996)'.

Aspects of Language Production

Skehan (1998) distinguishes three aspects of production: fluency – the ability of the speaker to mobilize the system to express meaning in real time; accuracy – the capacity to conform to the target language norms; complexity – the application of complex, sophisticated forms. Each of the aspects corresponds to a different system of language. Fluency relies on the data stored in the memory-based system from which prefabricated chunks of language can be drawn and which also provides communication strategies if problems need to be dealt with. Although both accuracy and complexity entail syntactic processing and draw on the rule-based system, they differ considerably with respect to the level of control and willingness to take risk: while accuracy reflects the speaker's need to manage the resources and refrain from making mistakes, complexity is indicative of the drive to experiment with language (Ellis, 2005: 15). Given the limited nature of human processing capacity, L2 learners have to reach a kind of compromise between the three aspects: more attention directed to one of them may result in the deterioration of the others (Skehan, 1998).

The emphasis on any of the three aspects also depends on the context in which the utterance is generated. A whole array of speech characteristics imprint importantly on the produced language. First, speaking is reciprocal – speakers need to adapt the language they produce to verbal and non-verbal reactions of the audience. Most conversations take place *here and now*, which forces the speaker to make decisions concerning both the content and the form of an utterance online, not having time for corrections or checking. Thus, oral production is less predictable than writing. Moreover, rarely does symmetry characterize interlocutors' rights in the conversation, for example topic initiation, asking questions or closing the conversation. Furthermore, the form of an utterance will also depend on its type and content as well as social distance between the speakers.

A question arises as to how learners of a foreign language can be assisted in the burdensome task of learning to speak if directing their attention to one of the aspects will most likely negatively affect the remaining two (Skehan, 1998). Simultaneous focus on all three aspects seems to pose an overwhelming challenge: increased emphasis on fluency might lead to overreliance on ready-made expressions and

insensitivity to the application of grammatical rules; greater pressure on grammatical accuracy will affect fluency and discourage learners from experimenting with language, while too much experimentation with new words and structures might result in the production of inaccurate forms and hinder fluency (Ellis, 2005: 16). It seems justifiable to say that type of task learners are confronted with, depending on the emphasis on any of the aspects, will directly influence their development (Bygate, 2001: 17). The results obtained in a number of studies (e.g. Bygate, 1999; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) corroborate the assumption that the three aspects of language production are not only separate concepts but also compete with one another, given the limited processing capacity (Ellis, 2008: 491).

The Effects of Speech Planning on L2 Production

Ellis (2005, 2008) distinguishes two types of task-based planning: *pretask planning* and *within-task planning*. Pretask planning is further divided into *rehearsal* and *strategic planning*. The former refers to an opportunity learners receive to perform the task at least twice, with the first performance treated as a preparation for the one that follows. In strategic planning, learners examine the content and determine how to express it. What differs strategic planning from other pretask activities, such as brainstorming, searching the dictionary or inspecting the model for production, is the fact that the content needs to be provided to the learners (Ellis, 2005: 3). Within-task planning can be further divided depending on whether learners performing a task do it under time pressure or not. An unpressured performance allows learners to plan their production carefully online, which results in the so-called *planned language use*, whereas pressured performance requires brisk planning which leads to *unplanned language use*. The two types of language use, according to Ochs (1979), differ considerably with respect to the extent to which targetlike forms are used: while unplanned language use is characterized by the appearance of non-standard forms acquired in early stages of acquisition, planned language use displays the application of more complex forms. Generally, the two types of planning, being separate in character, do not exclude each other within the same task (Ellis, 2008: 493–494).

Planning may affect both the content and the choice of language forms employed to express this content. Ellis (2005: 17) believes that planning allows learners to draw from their L2 knowledge through controlled processing and it also promotes selective attention, leaving enough time for monitoring. The impact of pretask planning and unpressured online planning on task performance is, however, different: pretask planning enables learners to conceptualize the message content and facilitates

controlled processing and selective attention to form, while unpressured online planning influences the choices made at the level of formulation, since it allows controlled processing and monitoring, leaving out the dimension of conceptualization.

Research on Task Planning

Research on rehearsal has shown that repeated performance of the same task positively affects all the three aspects of speech production. Bygate (1996) compared the production of the same learner who described a short *Tom and Jerry* cartoon on two occasions. The benefits of task repetition were manifested in the increased complexity of the presentation on the second occasion: more lexical verbs were used as well as irregular past tense forms, more sophisticated lexical items appeared together with a wider range of cohesive devices. Moreover, the number of inaccurate lexical collocations turned out to decrease, while self-correcting repetitions were observed more frequently. Another study reported by Bygate (2001) attempted to investigate the impact of practicing of a particular type of task on the second performance of the same task as well as the performance of a new task of the same type. As expected, the repetition of the same task resulted in greater fluency and complexity. Disconcertingly, no transfer of practice effect was observed in the case of the new task.

Analogous were the results reported by Gass *et al.* (1999) with reference to the study whose aim was to investigate the use of L2 Spanish in tasks that included the same or different content. The general proficiency, accuracy and lexical complexity improved only when the participants were involved in the task with the same content and no such effect was noted for the new task. Another task rehearsal study was presented by Lynch and McLean (2000, 2001). The students taking part in the experiment prepared a poster and a presentation on the basis of an academic article they read; then, they stood next to their posters and answered questions of other group members who asked them to explain and clarify the ideas herein included. Since the group consisted of a big number of students, identical or similar questions were asked, giving the authors the chance to present one idea many times. The researchers proved that repetition generally contributed to improved fluency and accuracy. The type of benefit depended on the students' proficiency level: at the higher level the positive influence was manifested in increased clarity and economy, while at a lower level grammatical accuracy and pronunciation improved the most (Ellis, 2005: 19). Bygate and Samuda (2005) reported case studies of three learners who were required to repeat a narrative and it turned out that task repetition facilitated progress from a chaotic reports to a well-organized and lucid story. As