Chapter 15

Ways to Proficiency in Spoken English as a Foreign Language – Tracing Individual Development

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Introduction

The usual way of measuring linguistic development in the practice of language teaching is through the application of batteries of language tests addressing various subsystems and skills. Oral proficiency testing invariably involves assessment of the students' performance in an oral interview carried out by a group of examiners, at least one of whom acts as a rater.

Since proficiency is a complex construct, the measurement of its development must involve an explicit identification of its perceived dimensions. The aspects of oral proficiency which were addressed in the present study include the qualitative aspects of *fluency, linguistic accuracy* and *complexity*. Although the choice of proficiency dimensions, that is marking criteria, varies across existing examination formats, the three aspects of proficiency examined in this study feature in the widely accepted standardised assessment frameworks (cf. *ACTEFL Examination Guidelines*, 1999; Council of Europe, 2001). Besides, in second language acquisition (SLA) research there is a tradition of measuring the quality of performance in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Robinson, 2001; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Tarone, 1980).

Spoken Language Characteristics

The present section briefly describes the most important features of the spoken language. These particular linguistic features, which reflect various aspects of the speech production process, are as follows:

(1) Speech is delivered via the oral/auditory channel, which means that it is produced by interlocutors talking face to face in a particular context. This inevitably affects the way in which speakers 'package' information and the language choices they make.
(2) Spoken language is typically dynamic and interactive; discourse develops as a result of interaction between the speakers and between the speakers and the context.

(3) Most speech is produced spontaneously, with no possibility of planning or rehearsing in advance. The real-time 'online' processing makes it sensitive to the constraints of short-term memory.

The above properties have profound implications for the organisation and quality of the subsystems of the spoken language, that is grammar, lexicon and phonology. In most general terms, the syntax of the spoken language tends to be fragmented and relatively simple; phrasal and clausal structures are less elaborated than those typical of the written genres. A similar lack of elaboration characterises spoken vocabulary, which is of a narrower range and more repetitive than the vocabulary used in the written language. Spontaneous, unprepared talk abounds in hesitation phenomena, including repetitions, reformulations, silent and filled pauses.

The grammar of the spoken language

In structural terms, spoken discourse does not resemble a hierarchy, and *subordination* and *embedding* are far less frequent than in the written mode. The most common pattern of clause combination in spoken language is the linking of clauses in a sequential way, with clauses being added one after another (which is a result of real-time processing). Because the processes of conceptualisation, formulation and articulation of a message run in parallel (cf. Levelt, 1989), speakers have no time to work out complex patterns of the main and subordinate clauses. Thus, clause subordination is rare in informal spoken English; the prevailing clause-linking device is coordination, with conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *or*. There are examples of clause subordination by means of *because* and *so*, but these two connectors often act more like coordinating than subordinating conjunctions. Subordinate clauses often occupy complete speaker turns, in which case they do not appear to be overtly connected to any specific main clause. Very often, they refer to and complement the other speaker's turn. Clausal blends, that is syntactic structures which are completed differently from the way in which they were begun, are also typical in spoken English (cf. Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Some of the most common structural features characterising the grammar of the spoken language are given below:

(1) Clauses and phrases tend to be linked through chaining or coordination.
(2) There is a high incidence of subordinate clauses which do not appear to be connected to any particular main clauses.
(3) Grammatical structures are far less complex than in the written language. Post-modification is rare.
(4) Many constructions are incomplete or simply abandoned by the speaker.

Lexical properties of the spoken language

The specificity of spoken language vocabulary is closely associated with the nature of speech and cognitive, psychological and social factors underlying the processes of speech production. It is important to note at this point that certain aspects of spoken vocabulary may be present in one spoken genre or text type, yet not necessarily observable in another. Therefore, the properties of spoken language vocabulary discussed in this section should be seen as representing informal, conversational register, rather than applying to the spoken language in general. The choice of this particular variety of spoken English is motivated by the intention to highlight those aspects of lexis which are the most salient characteristics of the kind of spoken discourse investigated in the present study. The general characteristics of informal conversational vocabulary, in terms of its complexity, range and frequency of individual words, based on the findings of corpus-based research (cf. Biber *et al.*, 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 1997), include the following:

(1)   Speakers avoid 'lexical and syntactic elaboration'; as a result they rarely use complex and sophisticated words (Biber *et al.*, 1999).
(2)   A fair amount of conversational lexis serves interpersonal and interactional purposes rather than transactional ones.
(3)   Spoken language is characterised by a high occurrence of prefabricated lexical expressions, often idiomatic in structure and meaning.
(4)   Many 'words' cannot be classified in terms of traditional grammar; for example *now* may be used to refer to time, but also as a discourse marker, used to close down a topic or phase of a conversation.

Avoidance of 'lexical and syntactic elaboration' is reflected in a relatively low level of *lexical density* (cf. Biber *et al.*, 1999). Another statistical measure of the vocabulary profile of a text is *lexical variation* (McCarthy, 1990; Schmitt, 2000). This parameter makes use of the distinction between *types* and *tokens*; repetitions of the same word are treated as one type, while each occurrence of a word is a token. A text in which many tokens are repeated has a relatively low number of types, and consequently, its lexical variation expressed as *the type/token (T/T) ratio* is low. The two measures reflect slightly different dimensions of vocabulary statistics. A text containing numerous repetitions of content words may be characterised by a high lexical density and a low lexical variation at the same time.

The effects of processing constraints on the quality of speech

Spoken language is rarely prepared in advance and rehearsed. The 'online' production of speech means that the processes of planning and execution of utterances run in parallel. As well as encoding his or her

own utterances, the interlocutor has to decode the language produced by the other participant(s) in interaction. The most obvious outcome of the difficulties involved in the encoding and decoding of messages is the occurrence of dysfluency phenomena in the form of *pauses*, *repeats* and *reformulations*. Processing constraints also have an impact on the length and complexity of syntactic structures the speaker is able to produce, since the possibilities of planning utterances ahead of the actual production are severely affected by the limitations of the human working memory (reported to have a span of five to seven words). By the same token, the size of the syntactic structure which can be held incomplete in memory until the next planning phase begins is reduced. Another consequence of this mode of production is the fact that structures occupying initial and middle positions of a clause are relatively simple when compared with those occupying final positions (Biber *et al.*, 1999).

The Study

Participants and procedures

The aim of the study reported in this chapter was to identify properties which characterise the spoken English of non-native speaking students of English. The aspects of spoken English, which will be discussed below, include the following:

(1) fluency of oral performance;
(2) grammatical and lexical accuracy, counted as the number of errors;
(3) lexical variation measured by means of the T/T ratio;
(4) grammatical complexity represented by the number of structural units, such as dependent clauses and phrases.

The study was conducted at the English Philology Department on students attending a three-year bachelor degree programme in English. On entering the college, the students typically represent the level of proficiency in English comparable to that of Cambridge First Certificate candidates. Graduates are expected to have attained the level of proficiency corresponding to CAE (Certificate in Advanced English) and to be nearing the level of CPE (Certificate of Proficiency in English). The students' achievement is measured by means of various types of language tests addressing language subsystems and skills. Oral proficiency is assessed on the basis of the student's performance in an oral interview by a group of examiners using descriptive assessment criteria, which are then averaged to give the final grade. The same questions keep recurring as the students take their final examinations: Do the students improve their oral proficiency skills in the course of college training? If they do, how much progress do they make every year? Can the students' performance on oral tasks be measured in a more objective way than