

2

The Teaching of Speaking

The mastery of speaking skills in English is a priority for many second-language or foreign-language learners. Consequently, learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much 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, and questioning strategies) to indirect approaches that 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. For example, Luoma (2004) 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 online processing
- Involves reciprocity (i.e., interactions are jointly constructed)
- Shows variation (e.g., between formal and casual speech), reflecting speaker roles, speaking purpose, and the context

Conversational routines

A marked feature of conversational discourse is the use of fixed expressions, or “routines,” that often have specific functions in conversation and give conversational discourse the quality of naturalness. Wardhaugh (1985:74, cited in Richards 1990) observes:

There are routines to help people establish themselves in certain positions: routines for taking off and hanging up coats; arrangements concerning where one is to sit or stand at a party or in a meeting; offers of hospitality; and so on. There are routines for beginnings and endings of conversations, for leading into topics, and for moving away from one topic to another. And there are routines for breaking up conversations, for leaving a party, and for dissolving a gathering. . . . It is difficult to imagine how life could be lived without some routines.

Consider the following routines. Where might they occur? What might their function be within these situations?

- This one’s on me.
- I don’t believe a word of it.
- I don’t get the point.
- You look great today.
- As I was saying, . . .
- Nearly time. Got everything.
- I’ll be making a move then.
- I see what you mean.
- Let me think about it.
- Just looking, thanks.
- I’ll be with you in a minute.
- It doesn’t matter.

Pawley and Syder (1983) suggest that native speakers have a repertoire of thousands of routines like these, that their use in appropriate situations creates conversational discourse that sounds natural and native-like, and that they have to be learned and used as fixed expressions.

In designing speaking activities or instructional materials for second-language 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.

Styles of speaking

An important dimension of conversation is using a style of speaking that is appropriate to the particular circumstances. Different styles of speaking reflect the roles, age, sex, and status of participants in interactions and also reflect the expression of politeness. Consider the various ways in which it is possible to ask someone the time, and the different social meanings that are communicated by these differences.

- Got the time?
- I guess it must be quite late now?
- What's the time?
- Do you have the time?
- Can I bother you for the time?
- You wouldn't have the time, would you?

Lexical, phonological, and grammatical changes may be involved in producing a suitable style of speaking, as the following alternatives illustrate:

- Have you seen the boss? / Have you seen the manager? (lexical)
- Whachadoin? / What are you doing? (phonological)
- Seen Joe lately? / Have you seen Joe lately?

Different speech styles reflect perceptions of the social roles of the participants in a speech event. If the speaker and hearer are judged to be of more or less equal status, a casual speech style that stresses affiliation and solidarity is appropriate. If the participants are perceived as being of uneven power or status, a more formal speech style is appropriate, one that marks the dominance of one speaker over the other. Successful management of speech styles creates the sense of politeness that is essential for harmonious social relations (Brown and Levinson, 1978).

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 is quite distinct in terms of form and function and requires different teaching approaches.

Talk as interaction

Talk as interaction refers to what we normally mean by “conversation” and describes interaction that serves a primarily social function. When people meet, they exchange greetings, engage in small talk, 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
- Reflects degrees of politeness
- Employs many generic words
- Uses conversational register
- Is jointly constructed

We can see some of these features illustrated in the following authentic example of a segment of conversational discourse (from Thornbury and Slade 2006: 132–133). Two women are asking a third woman about her husband and how they first met.

Jessie: Right. Right, and so when did you – actually meet him?

Brenda: So we didn’t actually meet until that night.

Judy: Oh, hysterical. [*laughs*]

Brenda: Well, I met him that night. We were all, we all went out to dinner. So I had champagne and strawberries at the airport.

Jessie: And what was it like when you first saw him? Were you really – nervous?

Brenda: – Well, I was hanging out of a window watching him in his car, and I thought “oh God what about this!”
[*laughs*]

Brenda: And he’d combed his hair and shaved his eyebrows – and

Jessie: Had you seen a photo of him?

Brenda: Oh, yeah, I had photos of him, photos . . . and I'd spoken to him on the phone.

Jessie: Did you get on well straight away?

Brenda: Uh, well sort of. I'm a sort of nervy person when I first meet people, so it was sort of . . . you know . . . just nice to him.

Jessie: – [laughs]

The conversation is highly interactive and is in a collaborative conversational style. The listeners give constant feedback, including laughter, to prompt the speaker to continue, and we see the examples of casual conversational register with “nervy” and “hanging out of the window.”

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 him or her recount a similar experience he or she once had (*sharing personal recounts*)

Some of the skills involved in using talk as interaction involve knowing how to do the following things:

- Opening and closing conversations
- Choosing topics
- Making small-talk
- Joking
- Recounting personal incidents and experiences
- Turn-taking
- Using adjacency pairs²
- Interrupting
- Reacting to others
- Using an appropriate style of speaking

² Adjacency pairs: A sequence of two related utterances by two different speakers. The second utterance is always a response to the first. For example, complain – apologize, compliment – accept, invite – decline.

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 situations that require talk for interaction. They feel difficulty in presenting a good image of themselves and sometimes avoid situations that 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. Hatch (1978) emphasizes that second language learners need a wide range of topics at their disposal in order to manage talk as interaction. Initially, learners may depend on familiar topics to get by. However, they also need practice in introducing new topics into conversation to move beyond this stage.

They should practice nominating topics about which they are prepared to speak. They should do lots of listening comprehension for topic nominations of native speakers. They should practice predicting questions for a large number of topics. . . . They should be taught elicitation devices . . . to get topic clarification. That is, they should practice saying “huh,” “pardon me,” “excuse me, I didn’t understand,” etc., and echoing parts of sentences they do not understand in order to get it recycled again. Nothing stops the opportunity to carry on a conversation quicker than silence or the use of “yes” and head nodding when the learner does not understand. (Hatch 1978:434)

Talk as transaction

Talk as transaction refers to situations where the focus is on what is said or done. The message and making oneself understood clearly and accurately is the central focus, rather than the participants and how they interact socially with each other. In such transactions,

. . . talk is associated with other activities. For example, students may be engaged in hands-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)

The following example from a literature lesson illustrates this kind of talk in a classroom setting (T = Teacher, S = Student):

T: The other day we were talking about figures of speech. And we have already in the past talked about three kinds of figures of speech. Does anybody remember those three types? Mary?

S: Personification, simile, and metaphor.

T: Good. Let me write those on the board. – Now can anybody tell me what personification is all about again? Juan?

S: Making a nonliving thing act like a person.

T: Yes. OK. Good enough. Now what about simile? . . . OK. – Cecelia?

S: Comparing two things by making use of the words “like” or “as.”

T: OK. Good. I’ll write that on the board. The other one – metaphor. Paul?

S: It’s when we make a comparison between two things, but we compare them without using the words “like” or “as.”

T: All right. Good. So it’s more direct than simile. Now we had a poem a few weeks ago about personification. Do you remember? Can you recall one line from that poem where a nonliving thing acts like a human person?

S: “The moon walks the night.”

T: Good. “The moon walks the night.” Does the moon have feet to walk?

S: No.

T: No. So this is a figure of speech. All right. Now our lesson today has something to do with metaphor. Now we’re going to see what they have in common . . .

(Richards and Lockhart 1994: 116–117)

Examples of talk as transaction are:

- Classroom group discussions and problem-solving activities
- A class activity during which students design a poster
- Discussing needed computer repairs 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

Burns (1998) distinguishes between two different types of talk as transaction. The first type involves 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 directions). Accuracy may not be a priority, as long as information is successfully communicated or understood.

The second type is transactions that focus on obtaining goods or services, such as checking into a hotel or ordering food in a restaurant. For example, the following exchange was observed in a café:

Server: Hi, what'll it be today?

Client: Just a cappuccino, please. Low-fat decaf if you have it.

Server: Sure. Nothing to eat today?

Client: No, thanks.

Server: Not a problem.

The main features of talk as transaction are:

- It has a primarily information focus.
- The main focus is on the message and not the participants.
- Participants employ communication strategies to make themselves understood.
- There may be frequent questions, repetitions, and comprehension checks, as in the example from the preceding classroom lesson.
- 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 questions
- Asking for clarification
- Confirming information
- Justifying an opinion
- Making suggestions
- Clarifying understanding
- Making comparisons
- Agreeing and disagreeing

Talk as performance

The third type of talk that can usefully be distinguished has been called talk as performance. This refers to public talk, that is, talk that transmits information before an audience, such as classroom presentations, public announcements, and speeches. For example, here is the opening of a fall welcome speech given by a university president:

“Good morning. It’s not my intention to deliver the customary state of the university address. There’s good reason for that. It would seem to me to be presumptuous for someone who has been here not quite seven weeks to tell you what he thinks the state of the university is. You would all be better prepared for that kind of address than I am. However, I would like to offer you, based on my experience – which has been pretty intensive these almost seven weeks – some impressions that I have of this institution, strengths, or some of them, and the challenges and opportunities that we face here. . . . I also want to talk about how I see my role during the short time that I will be with you . . .”

(www.sjsu.edu/president/docs/speeches/2003_welcome.pdf. Accessed June 9, 2007)

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 that 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:

- A focus on both message and audience
- Predictable organization and sequencing
- Importance of both form and accuracy
- Language is more like written language
- 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 an 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 with talk 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.