

SPEAKING SKILLS: TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

This article investigates the nature of speaking in a foreign language and the teachability of speaking skills, an area which with the advent of the communicative method has received considerable attention in the last two decades. The paper is an attempt to explore what competence in speaking involves and how it can be best acquired. After a short review of what native speakers know and do when they speak, we will briefly explore the notions of fluency, formulaic language, and communicative strategies, and then focus on the issue of teachability of communicative strategies.

Rezumat

În articol, ne propunem să cercetăm natura vorbirii într-o limbă străină și învățarea ei, domeniul care, odată cu apariția metodei comunicative, s-au aflat în centrul atenției cercetătorilor timp de două decenii. În lucrare, se face, totodată, o încercare de a studia noțiunea de „competență de vorbire” și modalitatea ei de achiziționare. După o scurtă trecere în revistă a ceea ce vorbitorii de limbă maternă cunosc și îndeplinesc când vorbesc, ne vom axa atât pe noțiunile de „fluență în vorbire”, „clișeu”, „strategie comunicativă”, cât și pe problemele de învățare a strategiilor de comunicare.

It has been observed from our L2 (Second language) teaching experience that speaking is the most quoted reason for studying a foreign language, and often a source of great anxiety and frustration for students. In particular, in Higher Education, the context we are most familiar with, expectations are often extremely high. In spite of the students' potentially limited contact with L2 and opportunities to develop their spoken competence, there is the unrealistic expectation that they become very proficient users of L2. For instance, in the inauguration speech given to prospective students and their parents it is often mentioned that at the end of their studies students will have reached native speaker proficiency. Such unrealistic hope is also present in the assessment criteria for the oral component which requires an extremely high command of the L2 in order to be awarded excellent grades. However, in our experience, the reality is rather different: while some graduates may achieve extremely high level of linguistic competence in L2, most students' ability falls far below, given their limited exposure to L2. Students are expected to speak fluently, to be able to participate in a variety of sophisticated communicative situations, and to discuss up-to-date topics, i.e. to have achieved a command of different discursive genres requiring a sophisticated knowledge of how communicative situations are organized in a foreign language.

What do L1 and L2 speakers need to be able to do when they speak? A brief historical overview

Drawing from the grammar-translation method used for the teaching of Latin and Greek, the approach believed that lists of useful expressions and idioms together with a sound knowledge of the grammar were enough to equip travellers with the necessary linguistic skills. Spoken language had no or very little space in the L2 syllabus. However, it was later realised that spoken language was important.

Not much had changed by the 70s when it was normally assumed that, having learned some grammar and vocabulary, the ability to speak English would follow in due time. Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence¹, according to which human beings are born with an innate capacity to process and generate language, was still informing the ideas about second language acquisition theory and thus L2 teaching was strongly modelled (whether through the grammar-translation or the audio-lingual method) to develop grammatical competence. Unfortunately, this competence fails us when students come to any native country since the ability to speak does not

¹Chomsky, 1965.

follow their knowledge of grammar. The understanding of language as a social semiotic² was developed in the 1980s, together with a sociological approach to verbal interaction, which provided a clear account for its structure and organisation³, and an appreciation of the role played by pragmatics⁴ provided a multifaceted view of the skills which L1 (and, by extension, also L2) speakers need to activate in order to take part in communicative situations. In order to produce appropriate language contributions, speakers need not only grammatical competence, but also knowledge of the rules shared by the speech community they belong to. Speakers also draw from their accumulated daily knowledge of how people interact with each other in different situations, through different modes, in order to achieve their communicative goals. This appreciation led to the development of a more sophisticated notion of communicative competence which results from the interaction of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and other competences. In the next section, we will review the effect that a more sophisticated understanding of language has had on L2 teaching and in particular, on spoken language.

What do L2 learners need to know?

Building on Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) developed a more refined framework for communicative competence which can be used for the purpose of curriculum design and evaluation in L2. Their model proposes that communicative competence includes grammatical competence (i.e. knowledge of vocabulary, rules of morphology, syntax, and phonology), discourse competence (i.e. knowledge of how language is used in context), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the rules and norms appropriate for L2 use), and strategic competence (i.e. knowledge of the strategies which can be used to compensate for knowledge gaps which may lead to breakdowns in communication). While scholars are still divided on whether learning L1 and L2 is the same cognitive process, there is a general consensus that learners transfer at least some of their L1 competence to their L2. We can reasonably assume that when learning to speak in a foreign language we draw on our L1 competence on how human beings communicate and, although at times we need to review and re-adjust our understanding of “how things are done” in L2, by and large we can expect that conversations open and close, participants take turns, change topics, avoid difficult topics, change or maintain discourse directions, back-channel, and are overall cooperative. Although cross-cultural pragmatics has recently highlighted the different values that norms have in different cultures⁵, it is arguable that there is substantial overlap in the manner in which human beings interact in different languages. According to Thornbury and Slade, “at issue, then, is not how second-language conversationalists acquire such skills from scratch, but how and to what extent these skills are transferred from their L1 to their L2. Related questions are: what factors – including instructions and exposure – might facilitate (or impede) the transfer of these skills into the second language?”⁶

Thornbury and Slade provide a useful review of the aspects which L2 users need in order to acquire L2 conversational competence. We will here briefly review only three aspects (fluency, formulaic language, and communication strategies) which seems to us to contribute most to the perception that a learner is a proficient speaker of L2.

Fluency

Although fluency is often an objective for L2 competence it is a rather elusive one to quote the “Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics”. In second and foreign language teaching, fluency describes a level of proficiency in communication, which includes:

- a. The ability to produce written and/or spoken language *with ease*;
- b. The ability to speak with a good but not necessary perfect command of intonation, vocabulary, and grammar;

²Halliday, 1985.

³Hymes, 1972.

⁴Brown *et alii*, 1987; Levinson, 1983.

⁵Thomas, 1983; Meier, 1997; Rose and Kasper, 2001.

⁶Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 214.

- c. The ability to communicate ideas *effectively*;
- d. The ability to produce *continuous speech* without causing comprehension difficulties or a breakdown of communication.

Although useful in some respects, the definition is rather general, vague, and difficult to quantify objectively. Other definitions tend to contrast fluency with accuracy. For instance, the “Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Applied Linguistics”⁷ argues that while the grammar-translation and the audio-lingual method, with their emphasis on grammatical structures and drills, aimed at establishing accurate (re)productions, the communicative method, with its focus on language in use, aimed at promoting fluency by means of role plays, simulations, and other language activities which stimulate meaningful verbal interactions amongst the students.

It has been argued that grammatical competence does not correlate with the ability to converse in L2. For instance, Schmidt and Frota⁸ observed that “the ability to carry on conversations is not just a reflection of grammatical competence” and that skilled conversationalists do not necessarily have a sophisticated grammar. In order to reach a more precise definition of fluency, they followed the development of a student in Brazil over an extensive period of time and they found that later conversations were characterised by:

- Fewer comprehension checks and requests for help, reflecting improved comprehension;
- A higher proportion of questions to statement, resulting in an increased topic control and more assertive self-repetitions, reflecting improved processing control;
- Longer turns, as measured by the number of words per turn;
- And a faster speech rate, as measured by the number of words per minute⁹.

The perception of fluency appears to be related to temporal variables (for instance, the speech rate, the number and length of pauses) and to hesitation phenomena whereby the speaker buys time by filling pauses with hesitation (*ehm...*, *well...*, *mmm...*), repetition, and self correction. Another aspect which appears to contribute to the perception that a speaker is fluent is the use of formulaic expressions and pre-packaged chunks of language. We will turn to this in the next section.

Formulaic language

Native speakers’ conversation is never entirely new and original: in order to maintain the flow of the conversation while processing their thoughts, native speakers can rely on a stock of formulaic chunks which they can access and use with minimal cognitive efforts. To quote Thornbury and Slade, “in real-time speech processing, where planning time is at a premium, these memorized ‘chunks’ offers speakers ‘islands of reliability’¹⁰ where they can settle momentarily while they monitor input and plan subsequent output”¹¹.

While some formulaic expressions simply buy some processing time, others (such as greetings) have also interpersonal functions since they can also open up relationships or smooth them, and others can have a textual function since they direct the listener’s attention to a particular aspect of the conversation. Formulaic language is, therefore, very important in L1. But is it transferable to L2? Thornbury and Slade¹² offer a useful overview of the research done in this area. Firstly, there appears to be considerable variation between learners. For instance, even ‘naturalistic’ learners, i.e. those studying L2 in the foreign country, do not all display the same amount of improvement or incorporation of formulaic language into their L2 repertoire. Two much quoted case studies are worth reporting. Schmidt and Frota’s student of Portuguese showed little evidence of increased use of formulaic language in spite of his daily exposure to L2. Conversely, Wes, an adult Japanese immigrant in Hawaii, made use of “a rather rich repertoire of formulaic utterances, memorized

⁷Johnson *et alii*, 1999, p. 2-3.

⁸Schmidt *et alii*, 1986, p. 262, *apud* Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 214.

⁹Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 216.

¹⁰Dechert, 1983.

¹¹*idem*, p. 218.

¹²Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 218-219.

sentences and phrases... which increase the appearance of fluency in English”¹³. Thus, it may be that while some learners show little integration of formulaic language in spite of the exposure they received, others make substantial changes to their spoken production. More research into learner variables (such as age, gender, motivation, learning strategies) is needed to explain such variation. Secondly, research into classroom learners has found that learners tend to under-use formulaic language and to rely instead on grammatical correctness¹⁴. This may be due to their limited exposure to authentic input, and therefore to a lack of awareness of the different features of spoken and written language. Lack of input as well as lack of opportunities for using formulaic language may be seen as the causes of the limited use of formulaic language in classroom learners.

Communication strategies

Communication strategies are useful resources in the development of fluency and, although L1 speakers also resort to them to overcome communication obstacles, they are normally associated with L2 speakers since they are used to overcome some gaps in their linguistic system. Tarone observes that they are used “to compensate for some deficiency in the linguistic system, and [to] focus on exploring alternate ways of using what one does know for the transmission of a message”¹⁵. Along similar lines, Canale and Swain defined strategic competence as “verbal and non-verbal strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence”¹⁶.

Although definitions vary, we may take communication strategies to be all the techniques that speakers resort to overcome communication problems: circumlocution, approximation, use of all-purpose words, word-coinage, mime, mixing languages, long descriptions, and paraphrases. Thus, rather than abandoning a topic altogether or dropping out of the conversation, L2 speakers make use of compensatory strategies and put across their message by means of linguistic strategies which, although less linguistically precise, still allow them to make a meaningful contribution to the conversation.

It seems to us that fluency, formulaic language, and communication strategies are strongly linked dimensions: for instance, a continuous flow of the conversation together with the use of formulaic language contributes to the impression that a speaker is fluent. Because the effective use of communication strategies does result in increased fluency and because some communication strategies are linguistically realised by formulaic language, we will in the next section discuss whether they are teachable.

Are communication strategies teachable? And if so, how can they be integrated into a foreign language teaching programme?

As L1 speakers we have learned from our socialization processes an internalised understanding of how verbal interactions take place. For instance, we know how to start a conversation, how to take turns, to avoid taboo topics, and bring a conversation to a close. As a result, the usefulness of teaching strategic competence as such has lately been questioned. For instance, discussing compensatory strategies Kellerman argues that “there is no justification for providing training in compensatory strategies in the classroom... Teach the learners more language and let the strategies look after themselves”¹⁷.

Dörnyei¹⁸ refers to some studies which evidenced some improvement in conversational skills, albeit the studies are not related to classroom learning: for instance, Tarone’s study¹⁹ found that some learners of Russian had improved their strategic competence after having been exposed to extracurricular activities in Russian more than their peers who were only exposed to Russian in the

¹³Schmidt, 1983, p. 150, *apud* Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 218.

¹⁴Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 219.

¹⁵Tarone, 1981, p. 287, *apud* Thornbury *et alii*, 2006, p. 220.

¹⁶Canale *et alii*, 1980, p. 30.

¹⁷Kellerman, 1991, p. 158, *apud* Dörnyei, 1995, p. 60.

¹⁸ Dörnyei, 1995.

¹⁹Tarone, 1981.

classroom. Similarly, Raupach²⁰ found that spending a period of time in the foreign country had improved communication strategies, and Bialystok²¹ found that speakers of more than two foreign languages had greater strategic competence, thus indicating that they could transfer their strategic competence across language barriers. Dörnyei argues that although there is little systematic research done on the usefulness of strategy training the studies available pointed in the direction of usefulness. The issue is therefore how are conversational strategies best taught? Richards argues that there are two approaches to teaching conversation: one is the indirect approach, in which conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction. The second, a more direct approach, involves planning a conversation program around the specific microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation²².

While the indirect approach makes provision to create opportunities to use L2 in 'natural' interaction through tasks and activities, the indirect method focuses explicitly on strategies used in conversation, such as turn-taking, topic control, speaker selection, repair work, conversational routines, and politeness strategies, pronunciation, and different conversational styles. Many scholars support the direct approach²³ and reach substantially similar conclusions. For this reason, we will here take as an illustration Dörnyei and Thurrell's work in this field. By rejecting the idea that conversation is a skill which is acquired by sheer exposure, Dörnyei and Thurrell argue that it should be taught directly and explicitly by "fostering the students' awareness of conversation and increasing their sensitivity to the underlying processes. In other words, if learners are conscious of the strategies they could use and the pitfalls they should avoid, and if they have a wide repertoire of set expressions and conversational formulae on hand, they are likely to make much faster progress towards becoming relaxed and polished conversationalists"²⁴. They identify four areas of competence which can be developed and strengthened in L2 by means of presentation of material, focus on the language used, and production:

- conversational rules and structure (openings, turn-taking; interrupting; adjacency pairs; conversational routines; topic shifts; closing)
- conversational strategies (message adjustment or avoidance; paraphrasing; using approximation; mime; appeal for help)
- function and meanings in conversation (language functions, speech acts; same meaning – different meaning; the cooperative principle).
- social and cultural aspects (time and location; the social situation; office and status; the social norms of appropriate language use; cross cultural difference).

Moving away from a narrow definition of teaching (understood as simply passing on new information), Dörnyei²⁵ proposes that teaching communicative strategies involves raising learners awareness about their communicative potential, encouraging students to take risks, providing L2 models, highlighting cross-cultural differences, and creating opportunities for practice in strategy use.

In the last section, we will discuss some issues which appear problematic and we will discuss the implications of the literature review for the teaching context we are familiar with.

Discussion

Just as there seems to be considerable ambiguity in what constitutes a 'graduate competence' in Modern Languages, we would argue that there is considerable ambiguity surrounding the definition of what constitutes L2 communicative competence and that it is often built upon the rather unhelpful one of the idealised native speaker. Individual competence results from a number of variables such as age, gender, personality, education, status, professional qualification, and

²⁰Raupach, 1983.

²¹Bialystok, 1983.

²²Richards, 1990, p. 76.

²³Bygate, 1987; Dörnyei *et alii*, 1992; Thornbury, 2005; Thornbury *et alii*, 2006.

²⁴Dörnyei *et alii*, 1992.

²⁵Dörnyei, 1995, p. 62-65.

specific processes of socialization the individual participates in and, therefore, there is great variation among native speaker competence since individuals are never equally able to perform different genres, registers, and styles. However, the literature on teaching spoken language skills assumes the existence of a monolithic L1 communicative competence to which L2 learners should aspire. As a result, one of the key objectives is to 'automatise' some of the fixed expressions used by native speakers and familiarise the students with set strategies which will allow them to improve their fluency in routine situations in order to approximate native speaker verbal behaviour. Bygate sees the integration of these features as an important stage in L2 acquisition as they 'may also help learners to *sound normal* in their use of the foreign language'²⁶. In a similar vein, talking about conversational routines, Richards observes that 'their use in appropriate situations creates conversational discourse that sounds natural and native-like'²⁷. It seems to me that underlying much of the direct approach to teaching conversation, there are still the vestiges of the myth of the supremacy of the native speaker. Sounding 'normal' is seen as good and it appears that the previously assumed superiority of the Received Pronunciation has now been transferred to other verbal behaviours. Much of the direct approach method is clearly based on a rather prescriptive view of language behaviour since it lays out clear guidelines for what constitutes 'good' speaking competence. Dörnyei and Thurrell²⁸ extend it to the social and cultural context with the obvious risk of stereotyping other cultures rather than raising awareness of potential cross-cultural differences. For instance, we may question the validity of the section on 'Cultural Differences and Taboo' and of 'Some British (middle class) conventional dos and don'ts' (Appendix C).

It has been argued that by teaching explicitly different conversational strategies used in L2, we help students to overcome cross-cultural inappropriateness which may lead to them being stereotyped. For instance Slade argues that "turn taking and turn assignment in conversation can be difficult for a second language speaker. A learner who mistimes his entry into conversation or who is unfamiliar with the *correct* formulae can give the impression of being 'pushy' or, conversely, over-reticent"²⁹.

In a similar vein, Richards observes that 'the inability to take up long turns in conversation is a feature of many second language speakers, who keep to short turns and appear to be less than collaborative partners'³⁰. Here again, an idealised concept of native speaker behaviour is adopted implying that native speakers are never 'pushy', 'reticent', or appear un-collaborative.

The direct approach method may also have counterproductive effects. For instance, by making use of memorized formulae and routine expressions L2 speakers may put across the impression that they are more competent speakers than they actually are and, as a result, lose the 'forgiveness' they enjoy as learners allowed to make mistakes. In addition, the learning of chunks of language as single entities, without any further appreciation of how they are constructed or used, and especially of their social meaning, may even slow down, in the long term, L2 learning. Johnson argues that learners need to 'move from chunks to a more general understanding of how the language works. The progression here is from procedural to declarative'³¹, the lack of which may lead to fossilization. Furthermore, memorised chunks of language, although in many situations rather useful, are problematic if students are not fully aware of their use. Richards provides the following example³²:

A: *Terry's father died.*
B: *What a nuisance!*

²⁶Bygate, 1987, p. 21.

²⁷Richards, 1990, p. 70.

²⁸Dörnyei *et alii*, 1992.

²⁹Slade, 1986, p. 79, *apud* Richards, 1990, p. 69.

³⁰Richards, 1990, p. 70.

³¹Johnson, 2001, p. 110.

³²Richards, 1990, p. 75.

As an L2 speaker of English, we could also provide examples from our own stock of badly used formulaic expressions which have sometimes caused embarrassment and miscommunication. In addition, lists of formulaic language may give students the impression that language is 'neutral', purely functional, and equally shared within the linguistic community while even formulaic language and conversational strategies may be used as signs of identity and belonging to particular language (sub)communities and speakers innovatively and creatively recycle language. Another danger of the direct approach is that it may encourage teachers to inculcate in the students an artificial use of the language which could result in a stilted oral production over-enriched with formulaic language.

In view of these critiques, we would argue that the teaching of spoken skills should be approached neither in a prescriptive manner nor by assuming that skills are naturally absorbed, but by drawing from work done in ethnography³³ to encourage students to develop methodological tools to 'read' language as a specific realization of a particular culture which is necessarily localised, heterogeneous, and fragmented rather than national and monolithic. This approach would help to avoid the creation or reinforcement of idealised native speaker behaviours and to develop an awareness and sensitivity to one's own and others' 'difference'. Given the institutional constraints of our own teaching context, it would be a delusion to think that such a major educational challenge can be achieved in some limited hours we are given to teach students 'conversation'. Indeed, it is arguable that they are not tested on what they are taught in class but on a communicative competence that can only be acquired over a longer period of time and through interaction with L2 speakers. It is for these reasons that we believe that an ethnographic attitude should be fostered as a 'tool' for life in all L2 classes. Every opportunity should therefore be used to raise awareness of how language is used in context and to develop in the students an ethnographic attitude. It may be the case that just as an ethnographic perspective is a valuable step towards the development of intercultural awareness³⁴, it can raise students' ability to explore from the inside how L2 is used in context, thus making them more autonomous learners.

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³³for instance, Byram *et alii*, 2001; Roberts *et alii*, 2001.

³⁴Jordan *et alii*, 2000.

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