
Theoretical Concepts and Thoughts of Speaking and Their Implications for Classroom Speaking Skills Teaching

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ABSTRACT

It might have been spreadly believed that speaking has its own patterns and structures that are different from those of writing. In classroom teaching practice, however, it seems that many teachers still expect their students to speak as if they were producing written texts. Such expectations might place high pressure on the learners' speech production and result in their reluctance or anxiety to speak. The purpose of my presentation is to elaborate the differences between speaking and writing and advocate a teaching approach which takes these differences into account. It also attempts to link relevant theoretical concepts and thoughts dealing with some basic features of speaking to practice and considers their implications for speaking skills teaching. If teachers take them into consideration, they will more likely be able to create speaking lessons that will truly help learners acquire speaking skills that are needed for an effective oral communication.

Keywords: speaking, writing, implications, speaking skills teaching

1 INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the crucial skills in foreign language learning and teaching. In spite of its importance, for many years, English language teachers have kept on teaching speaking skills by using conventional methods. One of the obvious problems with the practice of teaching speaking skills in the traditional classroom setting is that it is not the spoken forms of language and its characteristics which are taught to the students. It is believed that teaching speaking will not bring much of a result in terms of progress in spoken fluency if the materials used are based on written genres. Therefore, teaching the spoken forms of a language using samples of spoken texts should be part of the speaking skills teaching.

Indeed, the terms „speaking skills“ and „speaking skills teaching“ need to be clearly defined. The definitions of these two terms are closely related to that of speaking. Speaking has, so far, often been narrowly defined. When speaking skills are discussed, this often means in a context of public speaking. Speaking is, as a matter of fact, much more than that. Broader views focus either on communication realised to achieve specific purposes, e.g. to persuade, to inform, to ask for explanations, etc., or on speaking in terms of its basic competences used in daily communication such as booking a room, giving or asking for directions, etc. What these views share in common is that they consider communication and speaking as an interactive process in which individuals take turns in their roles as speakers and listeners and use either verbal or non-verbal means to reach their communicative goals. In similar way, Chaney describes speaking as „the process

of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney cited in Kayi 2006). In line with this view is Nunan's description of what teaching speaking involves. To teach speaking, according to Nunan, means to teach language learners to: (1) produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns, (2) use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language, (3) select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter, (4) organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence. (5) use language as a means of expressing values and judgments. (6) use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency (Nunan, 2003). Therefore, whenever the terms speaking skills and teaching speaking skills are discussed, they refer to all the above-listed skills.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

The current trend of speaking skills teaching requires that the goal should be focused on improving students' communicative skills. It is thought that only in this way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules which are appropriate in each communicative circumstance. Very often, however, teachers' assumption about speaking even prevent them from being successful in their teaching. Many teachers fail to recognise important differences between the nature of spoken and written texts. This may result in the fact that their way of teaching fails to meet their learners' needs because it does not reflect real-life conditions of natural speech production. It is, therefore, important to understand what the main features of speaking are, as opposed to writing, and what skills are involved in the speaking skills.

2.1 The Differences between Speaking and Writing

As has been mentioned above, spoken texts and written texts are different in many ways. One of the obvious features of speaking is that it happens in „real time“, which means that the person to talk to (the *interlocutor*) is listening, waiting to take his or her own turn to speak. Due to the time constraints that allow speakers only limited planning time, speech production requires „real-time processing“ (Thornbury 2005: 2). This results in the fact that a variety of mental process takes place at once: monitoring and understanding the other speaker(s), thinking about one's own contribution, producing its effect, and so on (Lazaraton, 2001, p. 103). In most written communication, in contrast, the writer has sufficient time for planning, editing, and revising the text. This might be one of the main reasons why language learners tend to find speaking difficult.

Crystal and Davy (1979: 87) also state that „time“ is the main factor which makes written text different from spoken text Messages in spoken text are received auditorially, whereas written language visually. The spoken message is temporary and feedback to the speaker is normally immediate, whereas the written message is permanent and feedback to the authors may be delayed or quite often

even nonexistent.

The next feature of spoken text is that it looks less neat than writing when transcribed because it often contains instances of disfluency such as hesitations, word repetitions, false starts, unfinished utterances and repairs (Thornbury and Slade 2007). This is what might make people assume that speaking seems to be disorganised or even inferior to writing. In this case, Halliday (1989: 77) explains that when judged based on the perspective of written texts, spoken language will always look chaotic on paper because first and foremost, it was not meant to be written down. In addition, Burns and Joyce (1997: 7) also posit that speech, far from being disorganised, has its own systematic patterns and structures which are somewhat different from those of written language. For this reason, judging spoken text through the parameters of writing means denying its basic characteristics and the purpose for which it is produced.

In terms of lexico-grammatical structures, Halliday (1989: 87) states that written texts are lexically dense and their sentence grammar is simple, whereas spoken texts having a lower level of lexical density have a greater degree of grammatical intricacy, i.e. the tendency to use a broader variety of tenses and aspects. In conversation, this intricacy may be realised across turns. In addition it is said that spoken discourse makes a frequent use of clauses and employs a greater variety of both syntactic and semantic relationships (1989: 86). Thornbury explains that the grammaring of spoken texts is constrained by how much information can be held in working memory at any one time. Therefore, to compensate for limited planning time, speakers use the so-called add-on strategy in places where written texts might use embedding or subordination. This strategy means that utterances, phrases or clauses, are added one after another and glued together by the insertion of the appropriate grammatical markers (2005: 4). He further says that speech is not only spontaneous but also essentially linear in the sense that speech is produced in the form of utterance-by-utterance. Both these aspects of spoken language are inevitable from the listeners' perspective as well because while written texts allow readers to read a text as many times as necessary, spoken texts do not (Burns and Joyce 1997). Consequently, listeners need enough time to process the message of the utterances. Should it be too packed with information or lexis, listeners would find it hard to absorb all that is being said.

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that speaking has its own patterns and structures that are different from those of writing. When compared to writing, spoken language uses more verbs and clauses rather than nominalization. In places where embedding or subordination might appear in a written text, speech freely adds utterances one after another. In terms of its lexical and informational content, spoken language is loosely packed—both to allow its audience time to process the content of utterances and as a result of real-time processing that a speaker encounters. All in all, speaking is dynamic and is operating under conditions that are substantially different from writing. This means that it does not always use grammatically complete and written-like sentences because while written texts can be redrafted, spoken texts are results of

one-shot production (Burns and Joyce 1997: 14).

2.2 The Role of Context

Spoken texts are not created independently, regardless of the environment, the situation, and the participants. Speech production takes place in a shared context between the speaker and the listener. The more shared context there is, the easier it is for the listener to participate in a conversation. Nunan (2010) defines context as the linguistic and experiential situation in which a piece of language occurs. The linguistic environment refers to the words, utterances, and sentences surrounding a piece of text. The experiential environment refers to the real-world context in which the text occurs (p. 304). Tannen (2007) describes a listener as a co-author and a speaker as a co-listener. In general, spoken texts carry a number of specific features such as: (1) frequent use of referents like pronouns or deictic words (this, that, there) pointing to the physical context, (2) ellipsis (deliberate omission of certain items), the meaning of which can be reconstructed only from the context, (3) non-clausal stand-alone expressions such as “Yeah.” or “Mm.”, whose interpretation is heavily context-dependent (Thornbury and Slade 2007). It is the context that primarily helps reconstruct the meaning of these utterances.

By contrast, in writing, those elements are used less or avoided completely because written texts, being decontextualised, need to be as self-explanatory as possible (Burns and Joyce 1997). While ambiguities are not desirable in written texts because there is no opportunity to provide further explanations, the meaning of utterances that are ambiguous can be easily negotiated in speech. Moreover, ambiguous utterances in speech are frequently welcome because they are a source of humour, an important ingredient of daily conversation.

2.3 The Types of Communicative Exchanges

In term of the communicative situation and its purpose, communicative exchanges can be classified into two major types, transactional and interactional. Bygate (1987) suggests that conversations are comprised of predictable routines. He differentiates between information routines (called transactional by other scholars) and interactional routines. These two types differ in their purpose and structure. Information routines or transactional texts consist of a number of highly predictable language structures. Their purpose is mainly to transact goods and services, therefore transactional (Nunan 2010). They include service encounters such as buying a train ticket, booking a room or negotiating a loan.

By contrast, interactional routines are not product-oriented. They are social interactions and are supposed to fulfil a phatic function, i.e. they signal friendship and establish social relationships within groups (Thornbury and Slade 2007). Nunan (2010) illustrates different functions of both types of exchanges in the following conversational extracts:

Extract 1:

Store attendant: Morning.
 Customer: Morning.
 Store attendant: Nice day.
 Customer: Uh-huh. Can you give me two of those?
 Store attendant: Sure.
 Customer: Thanks.

Extract 2:
 Father: Morning, Darling.
 Daughter: Morning.

Father: Sleep well?
 Daughter: Uh-uh. The thunder woke me up.
 Father: Loud, wasn't it. And the lightning What are you doing?
 Daughter: I'm going to finish watching that . . .
 Father: Well, don't have it on too loud. Jenny's still asleep. (p. 228)

Although it is obvious that the purpose of the first situation is transactional, there is an interactional element in the first part of the exchange. Similarly, while the second extract fulfils mainly an interactional function, the last line of the dialogue is clearly transactional (Nunan 2010). Burns and Joyce (1997: 5) say that many speaking situations can be a mixture of interactional and transactional purposes. Citing Brown and Yule (1983), Thornbury and Slade add that primarily interactional language is primarily listener-oriented, whereas primarily transactional language is primarily message-oriented (Thornbury and Slade 2007: 20). Viewed from this perspective, it can be said that listener-oriented interactions will tend to be freer in terms of their structure. This is mainly because interactional conversational exchanges can easily deviate from their primary focus reflecting the listener's personal involvement. On the other hand, message-oriented conversations will be more clearly structured, pursuing their ultimate objective of the message.

2.4 Characteristics of Conversation

In connection with the issue of free interaction practice, it is important to note that conversation is one of the most common types of speech production that people get involved in on a daily basis (Thornbury and Slade 2007: 5). In addition, they define conversation as „the informal, interactive talk between two or more people, which happens in real time, which is spontaneous and has a largely, interpersonal function, and in which participants share symmetrical rights“ (2007: 25).

Conversation, which involves a two-way interaction between people, requires a broad range of skills. Participants need to know how to interact and manage their talk. They need to understand the rules of turn-taking, knowledge about when and how to interrupt, how to change the topic, how to signal they

wish to speak and how to yield the turn. Furthermore, it is important for them to know how to signal interest and the fact that you are listening or even how to avoid long silences (Thornbury 2005). For this purpose, speakers need to be equipped with a number of discourse markers to signal the others what their intentions are. Speakers also need to make use paralinguistic cues, such as various body movements, gestures, appropriate use of eye contact, and so forth.

One of the concepts that is very important from a methodological point of view for many types of conversational exchanges is the concept of adjacency pairs. Thornbury and Slade (2007: 114) emphasise that the basic unit of interaction is the adjacency pair. An adjacency pair is composed of two turns produced by different speakers which are placed adjacently and where the second utterance is identified as related to the first” (2007: 115). Adjacency pairs typically include stereotypical exchanges such as question – answer, complaint – Denial, offer – accept, request – grant, compliment – rejection, challenge – rejection, and instruct – receipt. A successful conversation typically includes a number of such exchanges with one speaker initiating the move and the other one responding. Some scholars suggest that the success of a conversation depends on how cooperative both speakers are (Tannen 2007). Typically, the more cooperation there is, the fewer overlaps occur. The same applies for turn-taking. Smooth transitions between turns usually happen with speakers who collaborate (Burns and Joyce 1997). As a result, conversation always needs to be viewed as an act of multiple parties in which each individual is responsible for the potential success or failure of a communication. That is why conversation is greatly shaped by individual personalities of all participating members and their styles of communication. This means that even under ideal conditions, when all speakers converse in their L1, not all conversations are successful. Similarly, Hughes (2006) finds that communicative success of L2 speakers in L2 environment depends on the attitude of native speaker towards non-native speaker. When the attitude is negative, the communication is more likely to fail. By analogy, conversations between speakers who have different levels of knowledge may still be highly successful if all the participating members cooperate. Highly advanced speakers, therefore, are supposed to provide assistance to those whose level of language proficiency is lower.

3 CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

Several important implications for classroom speaking skills teaching can be drawn based on what has been discussed earlier. In respect to the related theoretical discussion about the teaching of speaking skills presented above, the implications for teachers’ expectations, teaching materials, communicative tasks use, and challenges of conversational classes will be elaborated.

3.1 Teachers’ Expectations

It is crucial for teachers to realise that spoken language is essentially

different from the written one. Teachers, hence, cannot expect their students to speak in full sentences as if they were producing written texts. Not only is this not the way people speak in reality but also expecting and requiring such skills from learners would place high pressure on the learners' speech production. Such expectations might result in the learners' later reluctance or anxiety to speak.

Teachers should also help their students understand the basic differences between speaking and writing and make them aware to use this knowledge effectively when speaking. For example, they should be less hesitant to express themselves, knowing that speakers in general string chunks of language together bit by bit without composing entire sentences in their minds before they start to speak. They should also be made familiar that repairs, hesitations, repetitions and vague language are acceptable in spoken language because without it speech production would be made impossible. Consequently, all these aspects can be practised in class through the use of meaningful tasks.

3.2 Teaching Materials

As has been explained above, spoken texts are not normally placed out of context in real life. Teachers should ideally make their teaching materials reflect the features of spoken forms. Crystal and Davy (1979) complained of the tendency of textbooks not to be real:

People in textbooks, it seems, are not allowed to tell long and unfunny jokes, to get irritable or to lose their temper, to gossip (especially about other people), to speak with their mouths full, to talk nonsense, or swear (even mildly). They do not get all mixed up while they are speaking, forget what they wanted to say, hesitate, make grammatical mistakes, argue erratically or illogically, use words vaguely, get interrupted, talk at the same time, switch speech styles, manipulate the rules of the language to suit themselves, or fail to understand. In a word, they are not real. (p. 3)

All these features are still deliberately being omitted from language teaching and simplified or unauthentic materials are used instead. Burns and Joyce (1997: 87) advocate „If the goal of language teaching is to prepare students to use spoken language effectively in social situations, teachers need to present students with authentic spoken texts in the classroom.“ This may include the use of recordings and transcripts of authentic discourse, which are more accessible nowadays than they used to be and it is not difficult to find useful samples online. They also suggest further that teachers need to know how authentic texts differ from scripted texts and how to use this knowledge to assist second language learners to develop speaking skills (p. 85). Furthermore, even though there might be some potential benefits of scripted dialogues especially at the beginning stages of learning, they warn against their exclusive use and point out:

For students to be able participate in spoken interactions outside the classroom, the teacher will need to introduce authentic discourse gradually into the classroom. Authentic spoken texts are more difficult for students

to deal with and how and when students are introduced to authentic discourse will depend on their level of language and their goals (p. 86).“

Teachers are, therefore, supposed to know when and how they introduce authentic materials to their students. One of the teachers’ tasks is, then, to help the students cope with real operating conditions and real language. If authentic materials are not used at all, the learners’ picture of English language can be idealistic but not real. Learners who are taught mainly through simplified materials may feel more confident about their English while in class but the minute they encounter and experience English used under real life conditions they are more likely to fail communicatively because they are not well prepared for it. What must be emphasized is that the use of authentic materials is not to be implemented exclusively or exhaustively. Adapted materials may help learners make progress faster from beginning to intermediate levels. However, this advantage should not be misused at the expense of excluding real language from classrooms.

The final point on the use of materials from textbooks is that teachers should be careful not to use textbooks as cookery books in which all ingredients are used exactly as instructed. Textbooks have their greatest benefit if they are used thoughtfully as resource books rather than a prescriptive manual. Nunan (2010:27) advocates that one of the advantages of using authentic materials in reference to context is that learners encounter target language in the contexts where they naturally occur not where the textbook writer uses them.

3.3 Communicative Tasks Use

The recommendation that types of interactions can be predictable has important implications for teachers. This means that teachers can help their students prepare for both types of conversational exchanges, transactional and interactional. Since these two types of exchanges have different features and a structure, they require different skills to be trained.

On one hand, transactional exchanges are relatively easy to deal with for their easily predictable structures (Brown and Yule 1983) and students will strongly benefit from practising various kinds of transactional interactions because these will help them prepare themselves for real-life situations. On the other hand, interactional exchanges will probably bring more enjoyment in the classroom due to their free nature and eventual inclusion of sharing personal experiences.

In summary, both transactional and interactional activities are highly useful and should be included in language teaching in a sufficient measure to provide plentiful opportunities for learners to practise using both types of communication exchanges. In many cases, teachers will need to prepare extra materials to cover both types of communication adequately in their lessons.

3.4 Challenges of Conversational Classes

To become an effective participant of a conversation means to be able to interact with others spontaneously under many different conditions and about a broad range of topics. In this respect, conversational activities can be a challenge both for teachers and learners. It is challenging for a learner to become an effective interlocutor in a foreign language especially when one does not have these skills in one's L1 in the first place. By analogy, it is similarly challenging (if not impossible) to become a good teacher of conversational classes if one is not aware of all the skills that speakers need and/or if one cannot utilise them effectively oneself.

Apparently, it is essential for learners to have teachers whom they can learn conversational patterns from on a daily basis by observing the ways their teacher interacts in class. For teachers to be able to serve as good models as far as conversation is concerned is essential for several reasons.

Firstly, it is generally believed that languages are learned partly through imitation (Lightbown and Spada 2006). Secondly, evidence shows that teachers are a source of input for learners, even more so in an EFL context where the language lessons might be the only opportunity for some learners to listen to English being exposed. Thirdly, the teachers' role in the exposure of learners to the target language also should not be underestimated because it is a proven fact that some aspects of language are acquired subconsciously. Lastly, being able to experience various conversational patterns in their natural context enables students to gain unique language experience. Depriving students of these opportunities, on the other hand, is a fundamental pedagogical failure. By the same token, this is what Lightbown and Spada complain about when saying that in many foreign classes, teachers switch to their students first language for discipline or classroom management, thus depriving learners of opportunities to experience uses of the language in real communication (2006: 32).

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Within the limitations of this paper, an attempt has been made to introduce some of the major characteristics of spoken language that make speaking and its production significantly different when compared to writing. It also sought to link the individual features of speaking to their implications for classroom teaching. Based on the discussion presented above, several remarks can, now, be put forward.

Firstly, it is worth highlighting that speaking has its own patterns and structures that are different from those of writing. Spoken texts do not always use grammatically complete and written-like sentences because while written texts can be redrafted, spoken texts are results of one-shot production. It is, therefore, crucial for teachers to realise that they cannot expect their students to speak as if they were building a spoken text because this will in turn result in the students' later reluctance or anxiety to speak.

Secondly, spoken texts are not normally placed out of context in real life. This implies that teachers should make their teaching materials reflect the features

of spoken language. To prepare students to use spoken language effectively in real social situations, teachers need to present their students with authentic spoken texts in their classroom.

Thirdly, communicative exchanges can be of two kinds, transactional and interactional. Both of these two types of communicative activities are highly useful for students in real life; therefore, they should be included in speaking skills teaching in a sufficient measure to provide plentiful chances for them to practice.

Lastly, successful conversations typically include a number of exchanges with one speaker initiating the move and the other one responding. To actively participate in a conversation requires a capability to interact with others spontaneously under many different conditions and about a broad range of topics. To meet the conditions, the students should be made familiar with the rules of turn-taking, and the teachers should serve as a source of input and good models for them.

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