

DEVELOPING SPEAKING IN ENGLISH IN AN ANDALUCIAN UNIVERSITY

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Resumen

En este capítulo, se ofrece una descripción, justificación y evaluación de un curso cuatrimestral de 'speaking'. La asignatura se basó en tareas comunicativas estructuradas para fomentar una interacción oral controlada en cierta medida. Se supuso que esta opción evitaba el uso muy controlado, por un lado, y el uso demasiado abierto e imprevisible, por otro. La base de las actividades eran unos folletos fotocopiados con información dividida en casi todos los casos. El contenido de las actividades fue acontecimientos en revistas- periódicos de habla inglesa y española y experiencias cotidianas. En varias actividades los estudiantes tuvieron que intercambiar no sólo información sino opiniones también. Las actividades fueron estructuradas para posibilitar un mínimo de preparación lingüística para las tareas, y para tener un marco para la evaluación de la actuación durante las tareas. En general, el resultado fue positivo para los estudiantes más hábiles y las tareas contribuyeron al desarrollo de la fluidez lingüística. El gran problema fue el desarrollo de los menos hábiles en su uso correcto de la lengua. Para estos estudiantes habría que crear espacios temporales para una interacción intensiva con el profesor.

Abstract

In this chapter, a description, justification and evaluation of a semester course on 'speaking' is offered. The course was based on communicative tasks structures so as to stimulate oral interaction which was controlled to a certain extent. The supposition was that this option avoided oral use that was either too controlled, on the one hand, or too open and unpredictable, on the other. The basic materials were photocopied booklets with divided information, in most cases. The content of the activities were events taken from English and Spanish newspapers and magazines and personal experiences. In many activities the students not only exchanged information, but opinions as well. The activities were structured so as not to require too much language preparation and to offer the opportunity to evaluate the interaction during the tasks. In general, the results were positive for the more able students and the task contributed to oral communicative fluency. The major problem was the development of the less able in terms of accuracy. For these students, it was probably necessary to timetable short spells of intensive language work with the teacher.

1. INTRODUCTION

The experience to be described here is the planning, implementation and evaluation of a course on speaking development in English, at the third-year level of the five-year English Philology degree course at the University of Seville. The course is an optional one-semester course of about 3 hours per week over 15 weeks and this experience dates to the second semester of the 1999/2000 academic year.

2. BACKGROUND

The situation in the University of Seville is that the students come into the Faculty from secondary school after having passed a general entrance exam. They really begin to specialize at university, and even then they have to take various courses besides those in or of English. In each of the first two years, the students have a general English course, and they can take subsidiary semester courses in listening, reading, writing. Because the numbers are high, usually sixty or more, which in the past averaged over one hundred, the students tend to use the receptive skills more than the productive ones, especially speaking. When it comes to speaking, there is an enormous variation in levels and in particular problems, from fluency, to breadth of vocabulary, to pronunciation and stress, to correctness in syntax, and so on. Some of these variables are reflected in the assessment criteria given in Appendix 1.

In a questionnaire conducted in the year 1996/1997 with fourth and fifth-year students, it appeared about 42% of the classes were given in English all the time and 52% most of the time. Approximately 10% of the students had not intervened orally in class in the previous year and 28% only once. The average was about once a month. Furthermore, the utterances were of limited length. In terms of nominated teacher questions, 43% had been asked between one question a month and never. All of this was in an English philology course! Many of the students were quite happy with that state of affairs, and felt threatened when asked to respond in English in class. In fact, 57% of the students either wanted to be asked questions in English 'sometimes' or 'rarely'. Many of the students rarely initiated conversation in English, preferring to use Spanish wherever possible. In fact, it is very often difficult to create an atmosphere of speaking in English in class, possibly due to previous experiences, possibly due to there being monolingual groups and possibly due to a lack of interest and effort on the part of many students. Outside the class many Sevillian students do not come into direct contact with English and many seem to view English as something to learn and know, but not something to be used.

Finally, it must be said that the average Andalusian student of English at the University of Seville is willing to participate if asked to. That is not to say that all Andalusian students are extrovert and uninhibited, but it does not normally require any coercion for students to contribute to pair and groupwork tasks. Most students are sociable in the sense of relating to others, while not pressurizing others to be talking all the time.

3. THE COURSE

3.1. The Class

In this course there were 39 students enrolled, and we met for one hour on Monday, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. There were more female students than male ones in the ratio of approximately two-to-one. Some of the students were completely fluent, and may have been taking the course to pick up high grades, and some were very weak in many respects. Many of the students recognized that they did not use English much, took little

responsibility for their own development and were consequently hesitant in their speech, even on fairly straightforward topics.

The classroom had seats that could be moved with difficulty, with an aisle down the middle, and a blackboard. The acoustics were very bad, and the lighting not particularly good.

3.2. The objectives

Apart from the fact that students are rarely required to speak in class, and if they are it is very often sporadic and of very limited duration, the content of lessons is generally either linguistics or literature. The result is that day-to-day conversational type listening/speaking and the topic/content that might accompany it are missing. As a result it was decided to focus on both fluency, complexity/breadth and accuracy as does Skehan (1996). However, instead of using the target culture as the potential (though very artificial/unreal) context with the inevitable recourse to role-play, it was decided to emphasize the interaction between peers on mundane topics or those of current interest. In spite of the context being the classroom itself, it was felt that by using relevant topics the students would be motivated to participate and overcome many of their inhibitions. The prime mover of the oral interaction was to be the interest in the topics and communication tasks, which were designed for the students to complete in pairs for the reasons given below.

3.3. The content

Most of the content centred around the students' daily lives, current affairs and snippets from various magazines. The basis was the *structured communicative task* (SCT) rather than language items (Davis, 1997; Long, 1985; Long & Crookes, 1992). Most of the content was taken from Spanish medium sources, since they were readily available, relevant and acted as prompts for spoken expression. It was also felt that it was not unrealistic for Sevillian students to have to explain things in Spanish to foreign visitors. As will be seen later on, much of the interaction was based around pairwork SCTs of two types, opinion and fact, some of the topics of which are given in Appendix 2. Apart from the content, an inventory of some functions (Wilkins, 1976) was made along with one of communication strategies adapted from Dornyei & Scott (1997), both of which appear in Appendix 3 and 4. Basically, these latter inventories were kept as a check list, but not as a syllabus to be worked through systematically.

For both types of pairwork SCTs, the students needed photocopied booklets. For the information exchange, which is explained below, they had to buy the 38-page booklet for 400 pesetas (or about 2 euros). This booklet had SCTs which depended on students' own knowledge/ experience or on information. In the latter case, the information had to be on both sides of a page so that the student could not see what the other student had. In this booklet, there was an example of a worksheet on a song/record with corresponding activities (given in Appendix 5) and a summary of functions, with some common realizations, as well.

The opinion SCTs were given to the students in booklets marked A or B, with different information in each. The basic format of the discussion SCTs was to exchange missing information in the pair and then give opinions on the state of affairs. In many cases there was feedback not only on the opinions, but also the language of the tasks.

The booklets have the advantage that they are cheap and easy to manage. They can be adapted every course with new material. The students have something to hold on to and which gives them the input and which they can write on. Even though the focus of the course was speaking, the written word is very important for stimulating discussion and for keeping records.

Finally, the students prepared a short talk on a topic of their choice in the latter part of the course. After each talk the rest of the class could ask questions or give opinions on the subject. The topics ranged from pop groups and culture to problems of anorexia or alcoholism among the young to descriptions of places and biographies of people. The timetable for the three sessions per week are outlined in Table 1, even though it was not rigidly adhered to.

Table 1: Timetable

Day 1	Language preview	PW task	TOPIC (approx. 2 per week in pairs)
Day 2	Language preview	PW task	OPINION
Day 3	Language preview	PW task	SONGS (approx. 2 per week in pairs)

3.4. The method

The reasons for selecting interactive pairwork SCTs as the basic principle were numerous. First, the number of students (39) was high for a speaking course, so some form of non-teacher-fronted organization seemed necessary. Decentralizing increases the quantity and quality of interaction between the students (Brown, 1994), has them adopt roles that are not only responsive (Brown, 1994) as in the teacher initiate-student respond-teacher feedback sequences (Nunan, 1987) and reduces anxiety (Foster, 1998). The choice of pairwork rather than groupwork was that it was easier to design tasks for pairs, easier to monitor them and easier to ensure that all the students participated orally, even though not necessarily equally. Moreover, according to Hubbard et al. (1983), pairwork tasks are better for intermediate levels and are quicker to implement.

The second reason for selecting interactive tasks was that the emphasis was not on itemized language, but on general productive language development in the oral medium. Consequently, there was little point in an item-by-item progression. Third, it was decided that by beginning with topics that might be of interest and building interactive tasks around them, the necessary language would naturally evolve. However, it must be emphasized that the motivating rationale was not the adoption of a task-based approach a la Skehan (1996) or Willis (1996), but the circumstances surrounding the context of learning.

Nevertheless, the language/interaction in open-ended tasks, though not in single itemized terms, is an issue in terms of predictability (Pica et al., 1993) and in terms of monitoring. In contrast to those who take the open-ended communicative task as central both to syllabus and method, the type of task adopted here was the structured communication task. In this sense, the tasks have some form of fairly predictable content/language and a fairly predictable frame for exchanging information, experiences and opinion (Bygate, 1999), and a limited set of outcomes. Most of the tasks were based on the information gap principle, either drawing on the natural differences in the students' previous experiences or different information being given to them. At least a minimal part of the activity was assumed to be predictable. This principle is in contrast to open-ended communication tasks, on the one hand, and the structured practice and open-ended practice of the PPP paradigm, on the other, as shown in Figure 1 (adapted from Bruton, 1999). Since the course was on speaking and at a post-intermediate level, it was obviously not appropriate to use receptive grammar tasks either, such as those suggested by Ellis (1991;1993), Fotos (1998), Fotos & Ellis (1991) and Loschky & Bley-Vroman (1993).

Figure 1: Structured PW activities in PPP and TBI

Linguistic Focus: Item 1	Controlled Practice	Open PW/GW Practice	
:	:		
Linguistic Focus: Item N	Controlled Practice	Open PW/GW Practice	
	Pre-Task	Communication Task 1	Post-Task
	:	:	:
	Pre-Task	Communication Task N	Post-Task

The teacher-fronted episodes in the class were generally instructions, pre-task work on language or content, and post-task feedback. This paradigm is very standard and can be found in Skehan (1998) or Willis (1996). The feedback was either in the form of different students explaining their outcomes, their perceptions and their problems or the teacher covering general issues/ problems. In the case of the students summarizing, the framework sometimes was not dissimilar to Samuda's (2001) example of creating semantic spaces and <<guiding from behind>> (p.124).

During the course, each pair had to select a song which could be used to focus on a particular problem they felt they had in English. The pair was responsible for selecting the song, producing a worksheet and conducting the session in class. After the planned activities, I always asked the students to stop for two minutes, select three items or expressions in the songs that they thought were important and pay particular attention to them. The pairs also had to do the same with a topic of their choice. The idea of producing and conducting the sessions in pairs was to give the students mutual support and confidence and reduce anxiety.

3.5. The evaluation

There was no pre-test with this group, which would have been very useful in retrospect. However, in the middle of the course the students were asked to record themselves talking to each other informally and were given a feedback sheet on their performance. The main assessment at the end of the course was an interview, which included a summary of a topic they had read about in Spanish and some questions on the topic and on themselves.

In general the students performed confidently, but some of them did not achieve the minimum pass rate, mainly due to a lack of accuracy rather than fluency. As was to be expected the tasks during the term helped to give the students confidence and fluency. The general atmosphere in the class was very positive and relaxed, and there was a great deal of genuine communication. This was probably due to the fact that the students were a very positive group and very cohesive, but also that they were interested in the topics and activities provided. It was also noticeable that in the pairs where there was a difference in oral ability, the collaboration was very positive.

However, there were some serious limitations too. Firstly, the overall framework tended not to leave time to attend to the weaker students. These students needed more time on many basic errors. The problem for students who have been 'left behind' is that they rarely catch up, since teachers have little time for them and they do not know how to improve the 'basics' on their own. Many of these students get lost in the crowd, resort to their L1 wherever possible and make little effort to make contact with English, either because they do not want to or do not know how to.

It is significant that two of the six students who did not pass the course in June sought me out for some extra work in July to prepare for the resit in September. With these two, we recorded a number of short interviews and topics. We commented on their performance. I then had them do two things. Listen to themselves and rerecord until they felt satisfied. I also encouraged them to talk to themselves in brief snippets and to occasionally stop and see how well they can describe their surroundings. One of the two improved radically and has continued to do so, while the other improved, but not so significantly.

On the question of weaker students. They should have been identified earlier and one of a number of options implemented. These could have included cutting the class short for the rest of the students and including an intensive 10-15 minutes every class with these students. Alternatively, they could have been given an additional class every week. Another option would have been to group these weaker students together and for the teacher to complete some of the SCTs with these pairs, in real-time.

The second weakness is that the students had very limited vocabulary for day-to-day things. For example, one of the SCTs was describing their bedrooms, followed by another task which was what the alterations they would make to their bedrooms if they had 100.000 pesetas to spend. In the preview, when they asked me for language they thought

they might need for the task, there were so many items some of them did not know that it overload on assimilation for the immediate task was too great. As I wandered around monitoring they very often asked me items, and if there was items and expressions the various pairs needed I often stopped the class for a few seconds to fill the other pairs in. Even though the topics of the SCTs were usually reinforced by other SCTs on the same topic, the vocabulary development was slow in many cases. This is in line with the results of research conducted by Bygate (1999) and by Foster (1998). There were also a number of occasions where either the students resorted to Spanish or tended to use English which has strong evidence of pidginization – see Sheen (1994).

The third weakness was in the songs. Very often the students, logically, select songs they liked and emphasized the singers, the words and the music, rather than the language. The teacher had to intervene in some cases to ensure that some language focus was included.

The fourth major weakness was not to have recorded the students at the beginning of the course, so as to be able to compare their progress in the middle and the end of the course. These recordings are useful not only to teachers, but especially to the students themselves. They allow a global impression, but also the focus on very specific features of their spoken language. Furthermore, with monolingual groups, there are very often recurrent problems across the group, which can be given special attention.

4. CONCLUSION

The major conclusion is that the crucial factors in generating oral use are student numbers per class, content of the tasks, the atmosphere of the class and the physical organization. Additional factors affecting the outcomes might be the number of hours per week and the level and mixtures of levels of the students. However, the crucial factor is the number of students per class, especially if we want to help the less proficient to improve their spoken English.

Even though some research has shown that learners do not necessarily prefer to work in pairs, it may be the most effective classroom organization for the SCTs mentioned here. Group work is much more complicated to set up and monitor, along with the fact that some students tend to 'get lost'. Especially with SCTs the pair seems closer to the ideal since it is a manageable unit for classes of this size just.

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APPENDIX 1: ORAL ABILITY DESCRIPTORS

MARK	DESCRIPTORS: <i>conversation</i> (x 2)
3-4:	Virtual inability to keep conversation going. Rarely initiates, offers short responses & few backchannels. Limited functions. Has almost nothing to say.
5-6:	Limited ability to keep conversation going. Initiates sometimes & backchannels, but still limited unprompted participation. Common functions. Has something to say.
7-8:	Keeps conversation going, but still needs occasional prompting. More extended turns & functions, & has ideas/opinions.
9-10:	Keeps conversation going on a par with interlocutor.
MARK	DESCRIPTORS: <i>delivery</i> (x 2)
3-4:	Very short chunks, numerous pauses, segmented speech.
5-6:	Short turns fluid, but more extended turns still segmented.
7-8:	Fairly fluid delivery, but more complex utterances still artificially segmented.
9-10:	Perfectly fluid.
MARK	DESCRIPTORS: <i>vocabulary</i>
3-4:	Limited and often inaccurate, even on common items. Numerous hesitations even for frequent items. Resorts to L1->L2 items.
5-6:	Limited, but reasonably accurate, except some less common items. Hesitations for middle frequency items.
7-8:	More extensive, but sometimes lacks immediate access.
9-10:	Broad and accurate.
MARK	DESCRIPTORS: <i>structure</i>
3-4:	Limited range & often inaccurate on frequent constructions.
5-6:	Limited range, but reasonably accurate.
7-8:	Broader range, but still a few slips.
9-10:	Broad and accurate.
MARK	DESCRIPTORS: <i>pronunciation</i>
3-4:	Numerous typical phonological inaccuracies, often leading to lack of understanding. Limited intonation/ stress. Noticeable L1 influence.
5-6:	Mainly intelligible, with some recurrent inaccuracies. Limited intonation/ stress still. L1 still noticeable.
7-8:	Intelligible and good control of stress/ intonation. One or two niggling variations.
9-10:	Perfect intelligibility.

APPENDIX 2: STRUCTURED COMMUNICATION TASK EXAMPLES

Structured communication tasks: Discussion (A & B)	Structured communication tasks: Factual
Elian in the US: which position?	Where baptized and why there.
Advertising for children in Spain	Where prefer to get married and why there.
Rise of Christianity	State preferences for different family relations.
Population in Spain	Describe social groups in and why.
Reading in Spain	Guess what peer's parents do.
Abortions in Spain	Describe best/worst teacher.
Opinions about other EC members	State preferences for famous people in different occupations.
AVE advantages	Who does what at home.
University entrance: opinions	When last time late for an appointment and why. What said?
	Sports no longer practice and why.
	Sports that should/not be in the Olympics.
	Clothes, describe, the oldest, newest, the coolest, the most dated items, etc.
	Personal expenditure. Where buy certain things. The brands etc.
	Where first kissed, etc.

APPENDIX 3: SOME LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS

Introduce, greet & leave-take
Apologize (excuse), request permission, suggest, offer
Describe person, process, routines, place, objects, locations, events, experiences, abilities
State intentions
Give instructions, directions, etc
Explanations & examples
Express consequences/ result
Express comparisons & contrasts
Express choice & preferences
Express certainty; deductions
Express positive/ negative opinions
Agree & disagree
Express indifference

APPENDIX 4: COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

PRODUCTION	Self formal reductions & replacements Approximations Circumlocutions all-purpose words word-coinages literal translations foreignizings L1 uses mimes self-repairs, self-rephrases (give up – topic switch) Other appeals, gaps comprehension checks
FILLERS	Pauses Interjections
RECEPTION	Repetitions (to check) Clarifications/ repetitions/ confirmation requests Show understanding (verbally, non-verbally) Show (lack of) interest (guess, wait, feign understanding)
NON-VERBAL	Reception Production

Adapted from Dornyei & Scott (1997)

APPENDIX 5: SONG

50 WAYS TO LEAVE YOUR LOVER

(Paul Simon)

*'The problem is all inside your head,' she said to me.
 'The answer is easy if you take it logically.
 I'd like to help you in your struggle to be free.
 There must be 50 ways to leave your lover.'*

*She said, 'It's not really my habit to intrude.
 Furthermore, I hope my meaning will not be lost or misconstrued,
 But I'll repeat myself at the risk of being crude.
 There must be 50 ways to leave your lover.'*

*(You just) slip out the back, Jack.
Make a new plan, Stan.
(You) don't need to be coy, Roy.
(You) just get yourself free. /You just listen to me.*

*(Oh, you) hop on the bus, Gus.
You don't need to discuss much.
(You) just jump off the quay, Lee.
And get yourself free.*

*She said, 'It grieves me so to see you in such pain.
I wish there was something I could do to make you smile again.'
I said, 'I appreciate that, and would you please explain
About the 50 ways ...'*

*She said, 'Why don't we both just sleep on in tonight,
And I believe that in the morning you'll begin to see the light.'
And then she kissed me and I realized she was probably right.
There must be 50 ways to leave your lover.*

TASKS

1. What relationship do the two people have?
2. What is one advising the other?
3. Why do people have problems leaving their lovers, do you think?
4. Who did you last give advice to? What was the advice? What were the exact words in Spanish and what would you have said in English?
5. Make up a verse with these names:
 Jean Mel Val Doug
6. Look back at the song and select three words or expressions you think might be useful in the future. Now spend two minutes storing them in your memory.