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Teaching speaking

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Teaching Speaking

NIVJA H. DE JONG

Speaking Under Time Pressure

To speak a language well, a language user needs to translate what she or he means to say into intelligible sounds, and do so fast. That this is a very hard task in a second language becomes painfully apparent when a second language speaker participates in a conversation using the foreign language. If the conversation is on a familiar topic in a familiar context, she may understand much of what is being said and may almost instantly know what she wants to say. By the time she has figured out a way to say it, however, the conversation has already changed topics. The skill of listening is similarly difficult because of strict time constraints, especially when listening to native speakers with a fairly high speech rate. But listening can be done “well enough” by guessing the gist of the message on the basis of prominent words in combination with the available context. Ferreira and Patson (2007) show that even native listeners rely on representations that are incomplete, shallow, and sometimes even inaccurate. For speaking, on the other hand, it is necessary to know how to use the appropriate words and structures within strict time constraints, and shallow processing does not suffice.

What to Teach?

One way to identify the goals of second language learning is by defining and deconstructing language ability. Influential theories of second language ability acknowledge the fact that language ability includes all facets of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, [1980](#); Bachman & Palmer, [1996](#); Celce-Murcia, [2007](#)), and conceive of language ability as consisting of linguistic knowledge and skills (functional and sociolinguistic) and strategic competence.

Below is a list of the different types of knowledge that are needed for successful speaking. With each type of knowledge there is an accompanying skill—namely, the skill to access the corresponding knowledge quickly and efficiently. I will briefly expand on each type of knowledge below.

Types of knowledge needed for successful second language speaking are:

- lexicalized items and phrases;
- morphosyntax;
- pronunciation;
- nonverbal gestures;
- pragmatic knowledge;
- problem-solving mechanisms.

The first type, *knowledge of lexical items*, involves linking up meanings with words, but also with multiword chunks, fixed phrases, and phraseological units such as “I think that X” or “not only X, but also Y.” Although a message can in theory be verbalized in many different ways, native speakers tend to choose a specific, lexicalized way. Pawley and Syder ([1983](#)) argue that there are two reasons why learning chunks, phrases, and phrase stems is necessary for becoming proficient in a second language. The first reason is that, if there is a conventional phrase that is used for a specific message, a second language speaker will sound odd and will be harder to understand if she uses a different (newly generated and grammatically correct) phrase. Knowing when to use which phrase is therefore also part of the pragmatic knowledge of a language. For instance, speakers need to know how to verbalize a request. Many times, the polite way to make a request is by literally asking for information (“Do you have more coffee?”).

The second reason why knowledge of chunks and phrases is needed if one is to become a proficient second language speaker is that producing chunks will lead to more fluent speech, because phrases are accessed as wholes. If a complete chunk is accessed and articulated, speakers can direct their attention to what they need to say, to monitoring their own speech, and to the reactions of their interlocutors, rather than having to pay attention to the linguistic formulation of their current message.

Even though much of the linguistic output of native speakers may in some way be prefabricated chunks and phrases rather than newly generated sentences using morphosyntactic rules, both native speakers and second language learners need (either implicit or explicit) knowledge about *morphosyntax* in order to generate new utterances.

With respect to *pronunciation*, at least three types of knowledge can be distinguished in the domains of phonology and phonetics. First, for speech to be intelligible, learners need to be able to pronounce the sounds and stress patterns of the target language. Second, they need to know how words and phrases are pronounced in connected speech. Frequent words are often greatly reduced in spontaneous speech: sometimes three-syllable sequences are compressed into one single syllable (e.g., Johnson, [2004](#)). In line with the argument from Pawley and Syder ([1983](#)) about formulaic sequences, reducing speech in a native-like manner will diminish the processing load for the listener. Furthermore, it has been found that reduced speech occurs more in informal settings than in formal ones (Hanique, Ernestus, & Schuppler, [2013](#)). Therefore, being able to use the right form within the right context is part of pragmatic knowledge. Finally, for speech to be understandable, learners need to know how intonation patterns alter the meaning of messages.

If one agrees that *nonverbal gestures* are part of language and that communicative and interactional competence includes correct usage of gestures (e.g., Clark, [1996](#)), one acknowledges that, along with lexical knowledge, morphosyntax, and pronunciation, nonverbal gestures and their accompanying meanings and usage rules need to be learned (Gullberg, [2008](#)). To take “pointing” as an example, cultures and languages differ in how pointing is used as a gesture.

With respect to *pragmatic knowledge*, some comments have already been made: Learners need to know how to link concepts to the appropriate, canonical forms in specific contexts. Additionally, because communicating usually takes place through interaction, learning a language also involves learning the interactional rules of the target language. To

be interactively competent, a speaker (or a listener) needs to know how meaning in interaction is co-constructed by the participants in the conversation. For this, the speaker (or the listener) needs to have language-specific knowledge about rhetorical scripts, about managing turns in conversation, and about how topics are organized (Young, 2011). Related to these interactional rules is knowledge about hesitating. Native speakers' dysfluencies have been found to be communicatively meaningful; they help the listener understand (Corley & Stewart, 2008). A speaker uses filler words such as "uh" to signal to the listener that she needs some time to decide what to say, or is searching for a word and wants to keep the floor. Learners of a language therefore need to know how to hesitate in the target language. Not only is the use of filler words language specific; even within a language, the choice of fillers may be dependent on the communicative setting (Watanabe, Den, Hirose, Miwa, & Minematsu, 2006).

Finally, learners of a language will be communicatively more or less successful depending on their communication strategies (Dörnyei & Scott, 1997) and *problem-solving mechanisms*. If a learner struggles to find the correct lexical item or phrase, there are numerous ways to solve this problem. For instance, a speaker can choose to abandon the message entirely (which would obviously not lead to communicative success), to reduce the intended message, or to use an all-purpose word as substitute for the gap in his or her lexical knowledge. Another problem that learners may often encounter in speaking is that they find themselves short of processing time and therefore need to buy time while speaking. This is another reason for second language speakers to learn how to hesitate.

Given this list of knowledge types and the accompanying skills to access them fast and efficiently, researchers have investigated the componential structure of second language speaking proficiency. From a study investigating knowledge and skills that are predictive of communicative success in long turns or monologues (De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen, & Hulstijn, 2012), one can conclude that *linguistic* knowledge and skills are major components. Linguistic knowledge (the first three items in the list above) and processing speed could explain as much as 76% of the variance between learners in communicative success. From a study investigating performance in conversation tasks (Nakatani, 2010), on the other hand, strategy use such as keeping the conversation smooth and signals for negotiation (e.g., comprehension checks) were significant predictors.

How to Teach?

Teaching what learners need to know (that is, the types of knowledge listed in the previous section) cannot be seen separately from teaching students the accompanying skills of being able to use these types of knowledge under time pressure. Mechanisms that are responsible for learning the speaking skills include skill-specific learning, transfer-appropriate processing, and automatizing speaking processes. These three mechanisms are described below.

Skill-specific learning implies that learning how to speak must involve speaking. DeKeyser (1997) showed that practicing comprehension leads to more efficient comprehension and practicing production leads to more efficient production, but that practicing the reverse skill has far less impact on performance.

Related to skill-specific learning is the notion of *transfer-appropriate processing* (Lightbown, 2007). Transfer-appropriate processing implies that knowledge and skills that are learned in the classroom are more likely to be transferred to situations outside the classroom if the situations in and outside the classroom are alike. Rugg, Johnson, Park, and Uncapher (2008) proposed that the ease of retrieving earlier stored information depends on the extent to which the same brain regions are as active upon storing this information as when it needs to be retrieved. Because learners will ultimately need to use their language knowledge in the real world, in real communication, teachers should aim to match the settings as they will occur in real communication as closely as possible.

A third mechanism involved in learning the speaking skill is *automatization*. Through practicing speaking, the processes needed for speaking are repeated, and this will lead to automaticity of these processes (Segalowitz & Hulstijn, 2005). There are two ways in which speakers reach efficiency in using the knowledge needed for speaking. One way is by accessing whole chunks or phrases, the other is by having rules become proceduralized. If a speaker has fast access to the phraseological unit "I am going to go X-ing," then the speaker can produce this chunk in time, at least if the correct verb is also inserted in time. The other way for a speaker to formulate this sentence is by applying the morphosyntactic rules needed to produce it from scratch, as it were. Either way, fluent speech will be the result of highly automatized processes that retrieve (lexical or phrasal) items and subsequently apply morphosyntactic and phonological rules.

Activities

As suggested in the above discussion, activities in the classroom that focus on teaching speaking skills should involve activities where learners speak in tasks that involve settings that match real communication closely and where learners get ample opportunity for practice (i.e., repetition).

One such task type in the classroom is suggested by Gatbonton and Segalowitz (2005), who present a method in which the repetition itself is needed in order to reach a shared communicative goal. This method integrates ideas from split information or information gap tasks, where exchanging information is required (Doughty & Pica, 1986). Similarly, Lambert, Kormos, and Minn (2017) combined task repetition with task integrity, by having learners repeat the same tasks to different interlocutors. The learners improved in fluency without becoming fatigued or bored with the task. In another repetitive task, the 4/3/2 task, learners speak about a given topic for four minutes, then retell it in three minutes, and then retell it again in two minutes, a system which has been shown to promote fluency. To give learners the opportunity to enhance their grammatical accuracy and complexity, however, the time allotted for speaking would better be kept constant (Thai & Boers, 2016).

It may not be the case that learning all types of knowledge needs to be matched to communicating in the real world to the same extent, in order for transfer-appropriate processing to take place. For instance, learning lexical stress in the target language has been found to benefit from computer-assisted learning (e.g., Bissiri & Pfitzinger, 2009) without genuine communicative goals.

Role of the Teacher

The teacher facilitates speaking and practicing speaking by choosing and providing the tasks and by creating a safe environment to lower learners' anxiety (e.g., Yashima, 2002). Furthermore, the role of the teacher should be as monitor and knowledge provider. The teacher's role as monitor is especially relevant when learners are implicitly building their skills while practicing speaking, because constraints in time and attention during speaking hinder learners' use of explicit knowledge (Lowie, Verspoor, & Van Dijk, 2018). Nevertheless, explicit attention to all aspects of speaking—pronunciation (Thomson & Derwing, 2015), morphosyntax (e.g., Ellis, 2006), communicative strategies (Nakatani, 2010; Rabab'ah, 2016)—has been found to benefit the learning process. The teacher (as knowledge provider) should therefore focus on all types of knowledge (and skills) when it is appropriate. One of the opportunities to do so within communicative language teaching is by providing corrective feedback.

Lyster, Saito, and Sato (2013) review studies on oral corrective feedback, including meta-analyses. These analyses point out that corrective feedback has a positive effect on language learning. The multitude of combinations of types of feedback, instructional contexts, and linguistic features—to which one must add individual differences between learners—is too much to do research on, however. Moreover, the outcome of such research would most likely not be applicable to teaching speaking in the classroom. As Brown (2007) illustrates, the teacher in the classroom needs to decide, in split seconds, on the basis of many different characteristics of the error, the learner, and the context, whether and how to correct the error, which is an almost impossible task. Brown supposes, however, that, “with experience, many of these considerations will become automatic” (p. 350).

Teaching Speaking and Theories of SLA

The suggestions from scholars on how to teach speaking find their roots in different theories of second language acquisition (SLA). These theories aim to explain the process of language acquisition and bring speaking and interaction to center stage, as means by which learners may progress in their acquisition. Much research, therefore, has focused on how speaking and interaction serve language acquisition. The purpose of this entry, however, was to discuss how learners become successful speakers. This points to a distinction between *speaking to learn* and *learning to speak* (see, e.g., Manchón, 2011, for a similar distinction in writing research).

The position that speaking is a means to learn language is shared by many but not all theories of SLA. The input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982) posited that learners only need to be provided with comprehensible input and that oral production should emerge (because pushing them to output before it emerges may harm acquisition). As a reaction, Swain (2005) formulated the output hypothesis, in which speaking is an important vehicle for language acquisition because it serves as a platform to test hypotheses that learners have about the target language, and hence it provides learners with opportunities to notice their shortcomings in production. In the interaction hypothesis, which is a modification and expansion of the input hypothesis, Long (1996) posited that interaction between learners and between learners and the teacher promotes negotiation for meaning, which in turn will lead to more comprehensible input.

The research described in this entry, however, also reflects theories that express the reverse image perspective: namely the learning-to-speak perspective. Cognitive approaches see language learning as skill acquisition. Therefore, learning to speak, like learning to play the piano, involves practice. An important move forward in second language learning takes place when processing becomes automatic and when conscious, factual knowledge (declarative knowledge) has progressed to procedural knowledge, which involves unconscious automatic abilities (Anderson, 1993).

1993).

Finally, in all perspectives on second language acquisition, scholars strive to seek learning methods that lead to internal second language systems that are native-like. However, it may not be necessary for second language learners to have underlying mechanisms similar to the ones they have for their native language as long as they learn to speak as efficiently and effectively as is necessary for engagement in successful communication.

SEE ALSO: Assessment of Speaking; Formulaic Sequences; Pronunciation Teaching Methods and Techniques; Rating Oral Language; Roles for Corrective Feedback in Second Language Instruction

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Teaching Vocabulary

STUART WEBB AND PAUL NATION

Teaching vocabulary effectively requires preparation and planning. Teachers need to ensure that their students are spending time learning the words that are most useful to them, and are engaging in a range of activities that will help them learn vocabulary both deliberately and incidentally. Teachers also need to have clear goals for vocabulary learning during the course and need to make their students aware of these goals. It is also important for teachers to use an approach that will help their learners develop comprehensive knowledge of the target words, and to measure vocabulary learning in the course. The following sections will provide a brief discussion of these issues.

Which Words Should Be Learned?

The unknown words which have the greatest value to the students deserve attention in the classroom. Typically, these words are the highest-frequency words that remain to be learned or words which fill a special need for the learners. The most frequent words reoccur most often in spoken and written text, so they have the greatest value for comprehension and use. For example, Nation (2006) found that the most frequent 2,000 word families in the British National Corpus (BNC) accounted for just over 89% of words in the Wellington