Teaching
Oral English

DONN BYRNE

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Preface

It is a common experience on training courses to find that teachers, especially those who are not native speakers of English, are very much concerned about the teaching of oral English. Both the syllabuses they follow and the textbooks they use call for an ability to handle techniques and procedures in this area for which their professional training, often still very formal and academic, has not equipped them. This book, which is an expanded version of talks and practice material used on training courses over a number of years, is an attempt to meet this need. It is hoped that this account of the teaching of oral English, together with the numerous suggestions for discussion and practical work at the end of each chapter, will be found of value on in-service training courses and seminars, where time is often too short to permit a full exposition of many of the topics treated in this book, and on training courses of longer duration. It should also prove useful to those who go abroad to teach as 'assistants'.

This book is the product of personal experience and of reflection on that experience. It describes procedures which I have found useful in a variety of teaching situations, with both child and adult learners, from which I have attempted to generalise. Clearly, however, the emphasis which I have placed on certain ideas reflects to some extent my own preoccupations and interests. The reader is invited to take from this book whatever is of value to him in *his* teaching situation – to treat it, that is, as a kind of sourcebook. He may adopt (and perhaps modify) those ideas which suit his needs and fit in with the course materials he is using. He may reject those suggestions which seem alien to his classroom situation. At the same time it is hoped that, through reading this book, teachers will be encouraged to re-examine their own beliefs and practices and also appraise the materials they are using.

I owe a special debt to Mary Finocchiaro, who not only encouraged me to write this book in the first place but also read and commented on the first draft in great detail, and to Susan Holden, who likewise helped considerably to improve earlier drafts of this material. I have been helped a great deal by comments from teachers on training courses in Latin America and Italy, and by discussion with colleagues. I should also like to thank Alan Maley of the British Council, whose picture set for micro-dialogue practice is reproduced on page 77. A year's leave of absence from professional duties with the British Council enabled me to

complete the book at greater leisure than would otherwise have been possible.

Much of the material in this book has appeared in article form in the following journals: *English Teaching Journal* (Argentina); *Lingua e Nuova Didattica* (Italy); *English Teaching Forum* (USA); *Modern English Teacher* (International House, London) and *ELT Documents* (ETIC British Council).

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1 Language learning in the classroom

1.1. The task of the language teacher

Why is it so difficult to teach a foreign language? To a large extent, it is because we are attempting to *teach in the classroom* what is normally – and perhaps best – *learnt outside* it. The classroom is of course a convenient place for imparting information but our main concern as language teachers is to develop the ability of our students *to use the language* they are learning *for the purpose of communication*. In order to develop the skills needed for this, especially the oral ones of understanding and speaking,[1] we have many obstacles to contend with: the size of the class, the arrangement of the classroom (which rarely favours communication), the number of hours available for teaching the language (which cannot all be devoted to oral work), and perhaps even the syllabus itself, which may discourage us from giving adequate attention to the spoken language. It is not easy to give effective oral practice under these conditions, especially in large classes. This is why it is important to have a clear understanding and a firm grasp of the wide range of techniques and procedures through which the spoken language can be practised. They are, in a sense, an attempt to accommodate language learning to the unfavourable environment of the classroom.

1.2. The role of the teacher

What, then, is the role of the language teacher in the classroom? In the most general terms he is there, as in any other classroom, *to provide the best conditions for learning*. The teacher is a means to an end: an instrument to see that *learning takes place*. As a human being, he is of course a subtle and sensitive instrument who cannot be satisfactorily replaced by an mechanical aid – although he may frequently require the support of one – since a machine cannot gauge the variable needs of the learners in the same way as a teacher can. But in addition to this general function, or perhaps we should say in order to implement it, the language teacher has specific roles to play at different stages of the learning process.

1 See 2.1. for a diagrammatic representation of the four skills and how they relate to the spoken and written forms of the language.

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It is only by acknowledging these roles that we can begin to see why we must vary and adjust our techniques to suit the various stages of the learning process.

1.2.1. The presentation stage: the teacher as informant[1]

At the presentation stage, the teacher's main job is to serve as a kind of informant. He *knows* the language; he *selects* the new material to be learnt (drawing on the textbook, using ancillary aids etc) and *presents* it in such a way as to make its meaning as clear and as memorable as possible. The students listen and try to understand. They do little talking, perhaps, though they are by no means passive (see 2.1.). At this point, then, the teacher holds the stage, as it were. It is, unfortunately, a role which teachers sometimes prolong unduly in their lessons, so that the students do not get enough time to practise the language themselves.

1.2.2. The practice stage: the teacher as conductor

At the practice stage, it is the turn of the *students* to do most of the talking, while the teacher's main function is to provide them with the *maximum* amount of practice, which must at the same time be both *meaningful* and *memorable* (see 5.1.). The teacher's role is now radically different from that at the presentation stage. He does the minimum amount of talking himself. He becomes more like the skilful conductor of an orchestra, drawing the music out of the performers, giving each a chance to participate.

1.2.3. The production stage: the teacher as guide

It is a pity that language learning in the classroom so often stops short at the stage above. Many teachers feel that they have done their job well if they have presented the new material effectively and given their students adequate, though perhaps controlled, practice in it. All the same, no *real* learning can be assumed to have taken place until the students are able *to use the language for themselves.* At any level of attainment they need to be given regular and frequent opportunities to use the language freely, even if they sometimes make mistakes as a result. It is not that mistakes do not matter, but rather that free expression matters much more, and the greatest mistake the *teacher* can make is to hold his students back. For it is through these opportunities to use the language as they wish, to try to express their own ideas, that the students become aware that they have learnt something *useful to them,* and are encouraged to go on learning – perhaps the most vital factor of all in keeping learning alive. In providing the students with activities for free expression and in discreetly watching over them as they carry them out, the teacher takes on the role of *guide* or

1   These analogies are not of course meant to be taken too literally, nor are the categories set up (which are discussed in detail in Chapters 4–8) absolute ones (see 7.1.).

adviser. In some respects it is this role, where the teacher has, as it were, to take a back seat, that is the most difficult one to perform, requiring not only skill and tact but often courage in the face of syllabus and examination requirements.

1.3. The learners

No class of learners is more than superficially homogeneous, however skilfully it has been formed on the basis of intellectual ability (real or imputed) and language aptitude (or, at the post-elementary level, language attainment). There remain enormous differences in learning skills, aspirations, interests, background and, above all, personality. Can the teacher afford to ignore these differences? Should he, in fact, even want to? Admittedly they cannot be taken into consideration at every moment in the lesson, but unless teaching is viewed as a kind of shaping process from start to finish, these differences need not work to the disadvantage either of the teacher or of the class as a whole. They can in fact be made to contribute to learning in the classroom. However, some compromise has to be made – this is part of the accommodation of language learning to the classroom – and it was implied in the preceding section that the most appropriate point for this is at the presentation stage. The *teacher* selects and presents the language data which the students are required to learn and practise. At the start, then, there is the same 'diet' for all – though how they actually digest it will vary greatly from one learner to another. But at the practice stage we must begin to take their individual differences into account and suit practice to the individual learner. Not all students, for example, *can* answer a particular question; not all students will *want* to. And then, at the production stage, as the teacher's active intervention – though not his participation – diminishes, the differences we noted at the start can be given full rein. The activities at this stage not only *permit* the students to express themselves as individuals: they also *depend* on their doing so for their success.

1.4. The needs of the learners

The goal of teaching a foreign language has been defined as enabling 'the learner to behave in such a way that he can participate to some degree and for certain purposes as a member of a community other than his own'.[1] Attention is thus drawn to the social function of language: for this purpose the learners need to be taught language for performing certain specific and variable roles as language users. Language learning defined from a more narrowly linguistic standpoint places greater emphasis on

1   S P Corder *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (1973) p 27

mastering the *system* of the language. For example: 'acquiring the ability to use its structures within a general vocabulary under essentially the conditions of normal communication among native speakers at conversational speed.'[1] The factor of communication is not ignored, but it is implied that mastery of the structures (or grammatical patterns) of the language will be the major goal. Language learning is thus generally regarded as a step-by-step mastery of the system, especially the grammatical structures, through which is eventually developed the ability to use language for any purpose.

For the learners, such an approach has two main drawbacks. In the first place, it sets them on a seemingly never ending path towards an ever receding horizon, in the course of which they acquire a great deal of language which they are never likely to need (and which in some cases cannot easily be used for communicative purposes: 'classroom' language such as *'I am standing up'* etc). This in itself leaves the learners dissatisfied, apart from the fact that in the drive for mastery of the system their individual differences noted in 1.3. are often ignored. Secondly, the approach tends to place too much emphasis on *formal correctness* as a criterion of language use, usually neglecting the fact that if language is to function as an instrument of social control, it must also be *appropriate* to the situation in which it is used. We cannot deny of course that the learners will have to master certain formal features of the language, especially in the area of pronunciation and grammar (e.g. concord, number, case, gender, word order) and it is part of the teacher's job to see that sufficient practice is given in these areas. But they should not be left in the situation of the drowning man who cried out for help with the words: 'I *will* drown and nobody *shall* save me!' For, after all, was he left to drown simply because he confused *shall* and *will* or because what he said was not *appropriate*? He had mastered, however badly, more of the system than he needed: a simple cry of 'Help!' would have been more effective!

What can we do to ensure that the students do not end up like the drowning man, even though we cannot be at all certain what uses they will eventually be required to put the language to? In the first place, the language 'data' — the structures and vocabulary which they are exposed to at the presentation stage and which they subsequently practise (and perhaps add to themselves) — should be selected for their communicative value. This does not mean that there will be no formal progression through the grammatical system: only that it will be peripheral rather than central, and items will not be taught simply because they are *there* in the language. Secondly, at all stages of learning, emphasis must be placed on the *appropriate* use of language — language as it is used in situations, as an instrument of communication, as a means of social control. Formal correctness (especially in the area of pronunciation) should be left to come

1   R Lado *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach* (1963) p 38

more gradually. And thirdly, as we noted in 1.2.3, the students must be allowed to try out the language for themselves through activities in the classroom. It is this 'here-and-now' use of the language which gives them immediate satisfaction and transforms it, from a remote goal to be attained in the future, into something real and tangible.

1.5. Language learning in the classroom

A matter which we must now consider is whether in fact it *is* the job of the teacher to attempt to regulate the learners' experience of the language for them in the form of a pre-selected 'input', a syllabus of grammatical and vocabulary items (the 'diet' referred to in 1.3.). However well these are selected for their communicative value, how can we predict what language the learners will need at different stages of the course? Would it not be better simply to provide them with relevant experience of the language on a more *ad hoc* basis, through 'talk' in the form of conversation and stories, and to provide opportunities to practise the language thus presented through activities, which in themselves will create the demand for yet more language, and so lead on to the next stage?

On a practical level, the effectiveness of the second approach will depend very much on the skill and ingenuity of the teacher: the advantages it gives in flexibility may be lost unless the teacher is sufficiently resourceful in making use of them. But to a large extent the difference between these two approaches depends on the *nature* of the syllabus and the *use* it is put to. A syllabus, for example, in which the language data is organised in the form of dialogues is in itself an attempt to present the students with 'talk' in natural contexts (see 4.2.). To the extent that it succeeds in bringing the outside world into the classroom, it can be a much more effective way of giving the learners experience of new language than the teacher's own improvised presentation, however finely this may be suited to the learners' actual needs at the time. But more important, a piece of language learning material such as a dialogue is a calculated exemplification of how certain bits of the language work: it has built into it some of the rules which the learners need to know in order to be able to use the language. The teacher's main concern, then, at the presentation stage is to teach the meaning of the dialogue so as to make the rules clear to the learners. The material itself will show these in action, as it were, but sometimes this in itself may not be enough, and the teacher may have to point a finger, through further exemplification and perhaps also explanation. On occasions he may even have to attempt to codify the rules himself, though generally not before the learners themselves have had a go at handling them. The actual utterances in the dialogue, or whatever piece of material is being used, are of little further use to the learners once they have understood the rules that govern them. (That is why there is no point in their learning them by heart: no amount of sentences learnt in

this way will lead to mastery of the language.) So the teacher moves on to other activities through which the students have *further* experience of the rules at work and learn to operate them for themselves.

Thus, at the practice and production stages, these two approaches converge. There remains, perhaps, one small but significant difference: an attempt has been made, in the form of the rules provided through the language data, to ensure that all the students will have the same foundation on which to base their activities. They may go about these in different ways, and some will be more successful than others, because the presentation stage is no more than a starting point. But it *is* important that they should begin with a shared experience of language that has been meaningfully organised as language learning material to show how the rules work. For, as we have noted, language is not simply the *goal*: it is also the *instrument* with which this goal is attained.

Discussion

1   What are the main characteristics of the three stages described in 1.2.1. – 1.2.3?

2   *We must vary and adjust our techniques to suit the various stages of the learning process.*
    (a) In the light of 1.2.1.–1.2.3, say why you think this is important.
    (b) Question and answer is a common form of oral practice. Say whether you think it could be used at all three stages and if so, whether it is likely to have a different function at each stage.

3   From your experience of teaching (or learning) a foreign language, give examples of 'classroom' language (i.e. items of language commonly taught in the classroom which are unlikely to be of use in everyday life).

4   Which of the following views on language learning do you believe in? Give reasons.
    (a) At all costs the learners must be prevented from making mistakes.
    (b) The learners should not be given explanations or rules. They should be asked to work these out for themselves.
    (c) Learning takes place mainly as a result of frequent repetition.

5   What reasons are given in 1.5. for organising language data at the presentation stage into (for example) dialogues? Do you agree? Give reasons.

6   *Language is not simply the goal: it is also the instrument with which this goal is attained.* What difference is there between language learning and the learning of other subjects?

Exercises

1 *The arrangement of the classroom rarely favours communication.*
Suggest ways of arranging the classroom so as to make it easier for
students to *talk to one another.* Are different arrangements likely to be
needed on various occasions?

2 Here are three situations in which a foreign language user might
expect to find himself:
(a) asking the way;
(b) taking a room in a hotel;
(c) going through customs.
Make a list of the basic language items he might need in these situations.

Suggestions and references for further reading[1]
1 On stages of teaching and learning see J Dakin (1973) Ch 1 and D
Girard (1972) Ch 6.
2 On the learners (1.3.) see M Finocchiaro (1973) pp 20—23.
3 On the functions of language (1.4.) see S P Corder (1973) Chs 1 and 2
and D Wilkins (1972) Ch 5.
4 On the importance of communication in language teaching see J Oller
in P Pimsleur and T Quinn (1971) *Language Communication and Second
Language Learning,* D Wilkins (1972) Ch 5 pp 146—149 and J P B Allen
and S P Corder (1975) Chs 3 and 6.
5 On language learning (1.5.) see J Dakiɲ (1973) Ch 2; L Newmark in M
Lester (1970) *How not to interfere with language learning* and L Newmark
and D Reibel in M Lester (1970) *Necessity and Sufficiency in Language
Learning.* For less extreme views, see D Wilkins (1972) Ch 6 and W Rivers
(1968) Ch 3 p 41 seq.

[1] All references are to books listed in the Bibliography on pages 142—3.

2 Oral communication
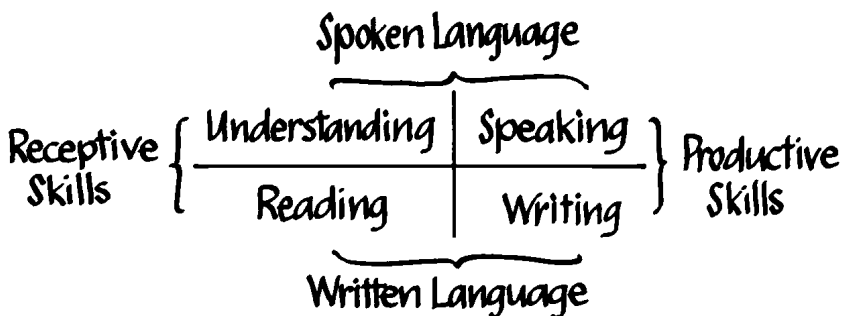
2.1. The nature of oral communication

Oral communication is a two-way process between speaker and listener (or listeners), involving the *productive* skill of speaking and the *receptive* skill of understanding (or listening with understanding).[1] Both speaker and listener have a positive function to perform: the speaker has to *encode* the message to be conveyed in appropriate language, while the listener (no less *actively*) has to *decode* (or interpret) the message. The message itself, in normal speech, usually contains a great deal of 'information' which is redundant (i.e. it conveys more information than the listener needs, so he is not obliged to follow with the maximum attention. See 3.1.). At the same time the listener is helped by prosodic features, such as stress and intonation, which accompany the spoken utterance and form part of its meaning, and also by facial and body movements. We should also note that, in contrast to the written language, where sentences are carefully structured and linked together (see 10.1.), speech is characterised by incomplete and sometimes ungrammatical utterances and by frequent false starts and repetitions.

2.2. Pedagogical implications

2.2.1. Listening comprehension
While a higher proportion of class time is needed to develop the ability of the students to speak, understanding of the spoken language cannot simply be left to take care of itself. The consequences of its neglect quickly show up outside the classroom, when the learners no longer have any control over what is said to them. In addition, poor understanding often generates

1 This diagram shows how the four language skills are related.

$$
\begin{array}{r} \text{Receptive} \\ \text{Skills} \end{array}
\left\{
\begin{array}{|c|c|}
\hline
\text{Understanding} & \text{Speaking} \\
\hline
\text{Reading} & \text{Writing} \\
\hline
\end{array}
\right\}
\begin{array}{l} \text{Productive} \\ \text{Skills} \end{array}
$$

Spoken Language (top) / Written Language (bottom)

nervousness, which may in turn further inhibit the ability to speak. Clearly, it is not sufficient for the students to hear only those models of language which they are required to master for the purpose of oral production. In the first place, their ability to *understand* needs to be considerably more extensive than their ability to speak (in the same way as they need to be able to read more easily than they can write). Secondly, these learning models (e.g. dialogues), which have been skilfully contrived to accelerate oral production, do not always contain a sufficiently large number of those features of natural speech which we noted in 2.1. For example, utterances tend to be more carefully structured and complete (simply because they have to be written down as texts), and the level of redundancy is generally low. In order to be able to cope with real-life language situations, the students need regular and frequent training through a programme of listening comprehension which exposes them in the classroom to suitably varied models of natural speech from the earliest stages of the language course. In short, they have actually to *learn to listen,* just as they have to learn to speak.[1]

2.2.2. Oral production
The main goal in teaching the productive skill of speaking will be *oral fluency*: the ability to express oneself intelligibly (see 2.3.), reasonably accurately and without undue hesitation (otherwise communication may break down because the listener loses interest or gets impatient). To attain this goal, the students will have to be brought from the stage where they merely imitate a model or respond to cues to the point where they can use the language to express their own ideas (processes that must to a large extent be in simultaneous operation). Two complementary levels of training will therefore be required: practice in the *manipulation of the fixed elements* of the language (principally the use of grammatical patterns and lexical items), and practice in the *expression of personal meaning.* For this purpose the teacher cannot depend solely on written texts (whose limitations have already been noted) as a basis for oral practice (although both dialogues and passages may serve as valuable starting points). Audio-visual aids, on the other hand, provide *at all levels* a powerful way of stimulating and developing oral ability without recourse to the written language.

2.2.3.   Interdependence of the oral skills in communication
Although in classroom practice it is often necessary to concentrate at certain times on developing one of the oral skills more than the other, we should not lose sight of the fact that oral communication is a two-way process between *speaker* and *listener.* Thus, the speaker does not always

1   Listening comprehension is dealt with in detail in Chapter 3.