Speaking: Awareness, Appropriation, and Autonomy.

by Scott Thornbury author of *How to Teach Speaking*

How do you convert a seemingly inert knowledge of words and grammar into fluid speech? This is probably the single most perplexing dilemma facing language students, as the following genuine statements attest:

- "This is the problem, I have been learning English long, but I can't speak, I understand the conversation but I can't answer immediately as I like."

- "The problem is to speak English with other people face to face. I can't find words. I always use the same sentences."

- "Sometimes I use English in my work and this is always a painful moment for me in which my heart is in my boots and I despairing search the words."

- "I know I need to practice my speaking a lot. During all my life, I have been doing grammar and reading, but nobody has taught me how to speak English. I think that this skill is always forgotten when someone teaches English."

This last comment is astute, and a glance at the speaking component of many coursebooks will confirm that speaking activities are often simply exercises in vocalising grammar, as if this were all that were needed. Unhappily, it is not, and there are plenty of first-hand accounts that suggest as much. For example, the researcher Andrew Cohen kept a record of his experience studying Japanese in Hawaii. The teaching programme was very form-focused, that is to say, most of the time was spent studying and manipulating isolated grammar forms. Cohen comments:

> I learned a lot of linguistic information about Japanese but did not perceive myself as acquiring much language at an automatized level, which inhibited me in my limited efforts to have conversations with Japanese tourists in Waikiki....[1]

Cohen's experience reminds us that knowing "a lot of linguistic information" is no guarantee that it will be available when you need it. And this raises two fundamental questions facing teachers of speaking:

- what linguistic information *is* required for speaking?
- how can this information be made available for use?

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[1] Andrew Cohen, 1997. Developing pragmatic ability: insights from the accelerated study of Japanese.

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I'll deal with each of these questions in turn. First, let's look at the transcript of an advanced learner recounting a shopping experience[2]:

> A: It happened I think two years ago, I went to a shop. It was Saturday, I usually do my shopping on Saturday. So I went to a shop to buy shoes, and I went to that particular shop in which I found my pair of shoes..
> B: Expensive?
> A: Yeah, quite expensive.
> B: How much?
> A: About forty to fifty pounds, something like that. So I went there, it was full of people and I tried on the shoes that I liked, so I decided to buy them. So I bought them. I went home after that, but it was almost the end of the day, the shopping day, so it wasn't left a long time for the shops to close, so when I went home and decided to try on the shoes again, I saw that in the bag were two left shoes. So I had, well, it was quite an expensive pair of shoes, so I tried to go back to the shop and exchange them so although I knew that they will exchange them, I was a bit worried. But I was late and the shop was closed already and I had to go on…next day on Sunday to get the proper pair of shoes.

What is perhaps not obvious at first glance is how effective the learner is with a relatively narrow range of linguistic resources. For example, of the 85 different words she uses in this 200-word story, all are in the top 2000 most frequent words in English, and the vast majority (90%) are in the top 1000 band. Because of repetition, these 85 words are spread quite thin, some of them (like *shoes* and *shop)* being recycled five or more times. Moreover, the content words (i.e. the ones carrying the information) make up only 40% of the text, the "padding" being provided by the high frequency grammar words (like *that, to, was)* that make up the other 60% of the extract.

On the subject of grammar, you'll notice that there are not many complex sentence constructions in the extract. Rather, most of the talk is built up incrementally by joining together a succession of clause- or phrase-length units with a handful of common linkers: *and, but,* and *so.* What the transcript doesn't reveal is the fact that these units match the way the talk is segmented into runs, each separated from the next by a pause:

> It happened | I think two years ago| I went to a shop| It was Saturday | I usually do my shopping on Saturday | So I went to a shop | to buy shoes | and I went to that particular shop | in which I found my pair of shoes |

This speaker's average length of run exceeds five words, and it is this capacity to produce long runs that – more than anything – conveys an impression of fluency. Fluency is not so much speaking fast as pausing less. One way that speakers achieve this effect is by deploying a battery of memorised formulaic "chunks". These chunks provide "islands of reliability" on which the speaker can rest while planning the next run. Another way of

[2] Gairns, R. and Redman, S. data collected for *natural English* (OUP).

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buying planning time and giving at least an illusion of fluency is to disguise pauses by filling them. The commonest pause fillers are *uh* and *um*, and vagueness expressions like *sort of* and *I mean*. There's a good example in the extract: *About forty to fifty pounds, something like that.*

To sum up, the speaker achieves an acceptable level of fluency because this is what she *knows*:

- a core grammar: This is probably much less extensive than the full range of structures she has actually been taught in order to reach her advanced status, since coursebook grammar is essentially a grammar of writing (a grammar of sentences), not of speaking (a grammar of utterances).
- the linkers *and, but,* and *so.*
- a core vocabulary of 1000 to 1500 high frequency items: these will cover 90% of her day-to-day needs.
- a core "phrasebook" of multi-word units (or chunks), including time and place adverbials (*two years ago, the end of the day, that particular shop)* and vagueness expressions (*something like that).*

As well, she can probably call upon

- some strategies, such as the use of the formulae: *it's one of those things that…, what do you call it?* to get around the fact that occasionally there will be words she doesn't know;
- again, to cover gaps in her knowledge as well as to reduce thinking time, some common vagueness expressions, such as *a thing, that stuff, …or something.*
- as well as some common linkers, a handful of discourse markers, i.e. ways of indicating the direction the talk is taking, such as *well, you know, I mean…*
- one or two all-purpose quoting expressions, of the *he said…and then I said…* type.
- some formulaic ways of performing common speech acts (such as greeting, thanking, promising, etc).
- some standard backchannel devices, i.e. the things we say when we are listening to another speaker, such as *really? you're kidding!* etc.
- the strategic use of intonation to segment the flow of speech into meaningful units, to flag new topics and to signal the ends of turns.

So, now we have a rough checklist of the knowledge base that is required for day-to-day speaking. The next question is: how is this knowledge made available for use?

Essentially, to ensure availability for use, there are three processes involved:

- learners need to be become aware of features of the target knowledge-base,
- they need to integrate these features into their existing knowledge-base, and

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- they need to develop the capacity to mobilise these features under real-time conditions.

For the first of these processes I borrow, from cognitivist learning theory, the term *awareness-raising.* One way to raise learners' awareness of features of spoken language is to expose them to recordings of speaking, and to study the transcripts of these recordings. For example:

> *To focus on discourse markers.* Script or improvise a conversation that includes some common discourse markers, such as *well, so, oh, I mean, right,* and *anyway.* Leave these out of the transcript and ask learners to restore them, checking with the recording to see if they are right. Alternatively, make two versions of a conversation, one with the discourse markers and one without. Before handing out the transcript, ask learners if they notice any difference. Then play them the two conversations again while they read the transcript. Having established the difference, ask them to comment on what effect the discourse markers have. Then supply them with the transcript of a dialogue that has no discourse markers, and ask them to insert them where they thing they are appropriate.

In order to integrate this new knowledge into their existing knowledge, learners need to *appropriate* it. *Appropriation* is a term borrowed from socio-cultural learning theory, according to which all learning – including the learning of a first and a second language – is mediated through interaction. This typically takes the form of *assisted performance,* whereby a 'better other' works with the learners, providing a supportive framework (or *scaffold*) within which learners can take risks and bit by bit extend their current competence. Over time, skills which are first *other-regulated* become *self-regulated.* Central to the notion of a transfer of control is the idea that aspects of the skill that once 'belonged' to the teacher are made the learner's own – they are appropriated.

In fact, appropriation might best be thought of as *practised control.* This contrasts with what is commonly known as *controlled practice.* Controlled practice is repetitive practice of language items in conditions where the possibility of making mistakes is minimised. Typically this takes the form of drilling. Practised control, on the other hand, involves demonstrating progressive control of a skill where the possibility of making mistakes is ever present, but where support is always at hand. To use the analogy of learning to ride a bicycle, it is like being allowed to pedal freely, but with someone running along right behind, just in case. In practised control, control (or self-regulation) is the goal of the practice, whereas in controlled practice, control is simply the condition under which practice takes place.

One way of gaining control over a speaking task is to repeat it, but in conditions where other-regulation is progressively relinquished. One simple but effective way of doing this is through the use of dialogues. For example:

> *Disappearing dialogue:* The text of a dialogue is written on the board (or is projected using an overhead projector). Learners practise reading it aloud in pairs (either open or closed), and then the teacher starts erasing sections of it. Initially these sections may simply be

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individual words, but then whole lines can be removed. By the end of the activity, the dialogue has "moved" from the board into the learners' memory. They can then be challenged to write it out from memory.

Finally, learners need to be able to marshal their newly acquired skills and deploy them unassisted and under what are called *real operating conditions.* That is, they need to achieve *autonomy* in the skill. Autonomy in speaking requires that the speaker is able to:

- work fast, be spontaneous, and cope with unpredictability
- anticipate and plan ahead
- ignore inessentials, and carry out the task using minimal means
- be accurate
- be versatile, i.e. perform a range of different speaking tasks about a range of different topics
- be reliable, i.e. perform the task equally well under different, even adverse, conditions

In classroom terms, this means learners need to experience the challenge of talking under real operating conditions – that is, being given opportunities to talk freely about subjects of their own choice. A teacher in the USA, Gisela Ernst, describes how she does this through the use of what she calls *talking circles*:

> The talking circle is a total group activity that generally takes place at the beginning of the 45-min conversational English class. Almost every day, teacher and students gather in the talking circle to share and discuss experiences, anecdotes, news, special events, introduce the weekly theme, and the like. Although the teacher might open the discussion by suggesting a general topic, the overriding assumption is that the talking circle provides a place and an audience for students to discuss anything of interest to them.[3]

To sum up: I have sketched out what I see as being the essential knowledge-base for speaking – a knowledge-base, incidentally, that is not beyond the range of relatively low-level learners. I have also outlined a three-step programme for transforming this knowledge base into the skill of speaking. It begins with *awareness-raising* activities, where learners are either presented or discover for themselves features of spoken language. This is followed by *appropriation* activities where learners gain control of these features, before achieving full *autonomy* as independent speakers in a range of different spoken genres.

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[3] Ernst, G. 1994. 'Talking circle': Conversation and negotiation in the ESL classroom. In *TESOL Quarterly*,28/2.

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