

Teacher Talk: the secrets of comprehensible speech for non-native speakers of English

Introduction

“Stop talking like a teacher!”

Although we may not recognise that we have a special form of speech, non-teachers clearly notice that we speak in a special way. In this article, I want to examine the characteristics of ‘teacher talk’ and think why our students can understand this style of speech.

We have all heard native speakers of English failing to communicate with non-native speakers and have noted that their failure to communicate is caused by their style of speech rather than the content of what they are saying.

In their future lives, our students will more often use English to communicate with other non-native speakers than they will to communicate with native speakers. Perhaps this means that our students need to learn some of the secrets of ‘teacher talk’ – some of the tricks which we use naturally to assist successful communication with our students.

What is ‘teacher talk’?

“He speaks to me as if he was addressing a public meeting.” Queen Victoria talking about Benjamin Disraeli, her Prime Minister.

If you compare normal conversational speech with the speech of a public speaker, you will begin to understand some of the characteristics of ‘teacher talk’. In your family home, you might be speaking to one, two three, or four individuals. In the classroom, you may be speaking to twenty or thirty individuals. At a public meeting, a politician might be speaking one or two thousand people.

The skill of the greatest public speakers is that, even when addressing a huge crowd, each individual in the crowd feels that the speech is addressed only to her or him.

‘Teacher talk’ is BIG talk, particularly in the foreign language classroom. If you have twenty learners in front of you, you make your style of speech suitable for speaking to fifty students. But, at the same time, you try to make your communication ‘intimate’ – as if you were speaking to just one person.

Richard Johnstone¹ described ‘teacher talk’ as a ‘problem reducing strategy’ which teachers exploit to allow them to teach French in French, to teach Spanish in Spanish, to teach Arabic in Arabic and to teach English in English.

When the ‘target language’ is also the language of instruction, teachers clearly cannot rely on the students’ total fluency in that language. Teachers therefore adopt a style of speech which exploits mime, body language reference to real objects, pictures, maps and diagrams which the students **can** understand in spite of their limited knowledge of the language of instruction. Teachers also structure their speech with regular pauses to allow the listeners to ‘catch up’ with their comprehension, with repetitions and paraphrases to give the listeners more chances to comprehend, and with regular comprehension checks to ensure that the listeners do not get lost. Teachers constantly ‘self-monitors’, carefully selecting words which will be familiar to their listeners. They use a lot of ‘cognates’ – English words which, although unfamiliar to the listeners, are sufficiently close to words in the listeners’ mother tongue to be comprehensible.



Teacher talk' has the following features:

- 1) Non-linguistic support for comprehension
 - a) Visibility – teachers make sure they (particularly their mouths and eyes) can be seen by their students
 - b) Facial expression
 - c) Body language (gestures) – when teaching beginners, teachers try to **demonstrate** their meaning with actions or gestures, at the same time as expressing their meaning in words.
 - d) Reference to real objects and people – *This is a red school bag. It's Mario's schoolbag, isn't it, Mario?*
 - e) Pictures, diagrams, maps, etc. – *As you can see there high mountains in Wales and Scotland.* (pointing at map of UK).
- 2) Regular checks
 - a) Largely through watching the facial expressions of the listeners rather than asking if they comprehend or asking for demonstrations of comprehension.
 - b) Eye contact, -- a good teacher frequently makes eye contact with the each student
- 3) Regular pauses
 - a) Teachers recognise that their students' comprehension will be slower than their speech so they pause regularly to allow students to 'catch up'.
 - b) Some teachers, after a long stream of speech, will ask the students to 'tell your partners what I have just said'. This allows students to share their understanding and helps students to catch up with their comprehension.
- 4) Familiar words
 - a) Words which students have learnt in previous lessons
 - b) High frequency words from the top 2,000 list. [You can see this list in the back of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English.]
 - c) Cognates – words which students will recognise and understand from their L1 knowledge. – in speech cognates are English words which sound like L1 words. In writing, cognates might be comprehensible from the spelling.
- 5) Key vocabulary related to a topic is taught or recycled before you start.
- 6) Familiar topics
 - a) Topics related to the everyday lives of the students which allow them to use their 'world knowledge' to assist their comprehension.
 - b) Topics which have been studied in previous lessons.
- 7) Immediate repetition and/or paraphrase
 - a) Teachers may repeat using the same words, or repeat the same ideas in different words giving their listeners more time and opportunities to comprehend.
 - b) Teachers build regular summaries into their speech
- 8) Slower, clearer talk



- a] Teacher talk is slightly slower than normal conversational speech, but should still carry all the features of normal speech.
- b] English carries most meaning through consonants rather than vowels, so teachers are careful to articulate (say) consonants clearly, particularly the consonants at the ends of words.
- 9) Exaggerated intonation and stress
- a] Intonation, the rise and fall of the voice, carries a lot of meaning (and also influences our facial expression). Teachers use exaggerated intonation partly to show their students the importance of intonation, but also because the exaggerated intonation will help their facial expressions.
- b] Teachers place very clear stress on the most important words in the sentence. The important words are the ones which carry the most meaning. Consider the difference between:
“Please WASH your hands after you have fed the cat.”
“Please wash your HANDS after you have fed the cat.”
“Please wash your hands AFTER you have fed the cat.”
- c] Intonation and stress carry a lot of meaning in spoken English
- 10) Structurally simplified language.
- a] Teachers speak in short simple sentences. They **pause** at the ends of sentences. They look around the room before they start the next sentence.
Good teachers try, as far as they can, to avoid, if this is possible, sentences which contain many subordinate clauses which are a more frequent characteristic of written communication, particularly in academic contexts, such as schools and / or universities or other educational institutions, because, even if the students can understand all the individual words because they are known words or L1 cognates, they know that their students are very likely, if not certain, to lose their way in the structure of the sentence.
- b] This does not mean that you cannot ask students if they won the football match yesterday until you have taught them to produce the Past Simple form. The only language they need to respond is either YES or NO. They will understand the concept of the past long before you have taught the verb forms.
- 11) Familiar routines – although students enjoy the excitement of new things, they are most comfortable with familiar routines they know and understand.
- 12) Clarity of discourse markers – students need to know where they have come from and where they are going.
- a] *In the lesson today, we are going to do THREE THINGS. Pause. (Refer to a list on the blackboard.) FIRST, we are going to read the text about ROCK CLIMBING on page, pause, twenty-seven of your textbook. (Hold up textbook, open at page 27, to show the picture of rock climbing.) THEN we are going to listen to an interview with Chris Bonnington, a famous rock climber, (hold up textbook showing picture of Chris Bonnington.) AFTER the listening you are going to write the answers to some comprehension questions.*
- 13) Tolerance of ‘interpreter language’.
- a] If your students are noisy, talking to each other, this is frequently because they are helping each other (perhaps through L1) to understand what you are saying. You can



either tolerate a degree of murmuring in your class, or you will need to simplify your speech even further.

- b)* You might wish to demand silence while you are speaking, but pause occasionally to give students a few minutes to help each other with comprehension.

Face, eyes and stance

The teacher's eyes are very important for communicating and maintaining attention. The teacher tries to make regular eye contact with all the students in class. The teacher is careful not to 'ignore' any of the students.

The teacher makes sure her face is visible and is particularly careful not to cover her mouth with her hands. This is important so students can see her mouth movements.

When talking to the whole class, the teacher is usually standing near the blackboard. The teacher tries not to speak to the whole class whilst sitting. Although the teacher moves around the class regularly, she tries to avoid talking whilst walking.

Giving instructions

The teacher always tries to plan the instructions she gives to the class. Students can often find it very difficult to understand and follow instructions. The teacher tries to keep her instructions simple. Sometimes, she will ask a pair or small group of students to demonstrate the task in front of the class. Sometimes, after giving a set of instructions, she will ask a student to repeat or summarise the instructions, before she asks the class to start work.

The teacher always calls the class to attention before starting to give instructions. When instructions are long or complicated the teacher may write a numbered list of instructions on the blackboard, and refer to this list whilst explaining the instructions.

Look at exercise 4 on page 56 of your green workbook

The teacher starts by calling the class to attention. She says "Now!" and looks around the class making eye contact with all the students. "I want you to open your green workbook (she holds up a green workbook) at p^{age} (pause) fifty-six. (She says 'page' with a rising intonation to indicate that a number follows. She pauses after the word 'page' to get maximum attention.) After giving the page number, she writes '56' on the blackboard. She also opens her own book at page 56 and shows it to the class. Again, using her own book, she shows the Exercise 4 on the page, and says, "I want you to look at exercise 4." – "It's here."

Calling the class to attention and getting silence

Many teachers have adopted the practice of standing in the front of the class with one arm raised. As students see the teacher in this position, they stop talking and also raise an arm. Within a few seconds, the whole class is quiet, the teacher and class lower their arms and the lesson can continue. This system of getting silence and attention is much better than attempting to overcome the noise by shouting or banging on a desk. This system reasserts the teacher's authority. Shouting and banging demonstrate that the teacher's authority is breaking down.

Protecting and using your voice

The teacher's voice is her most valuable piece of technology. The good teacher uses her voice to add variety and interest to her lessons and is careful not to strain her voice. When speaking to the whole class, it is necessary to speak louder than in normal conversation, but it



is important not to shout as this can damage the voice. Shouting suggests you are angry but also demonstrates that you are losing control of the class.

The teacher uses slightly exaggerated intonation (as mentioned above) and avoids speaking in a monotone. A monotonous voice sounds as if she is not interested in the lesson and soon loses the attention of the class. Although she is careful to project her voice so that it is audible in all parts of the classroom, she will vary the volume of her speech, sometimes speaking in an exaggerated whisper.

The teacher powers her voice from her diaphragm above her stomach, rather than from her shoulders. This creates a powerful voice and puts less strain on the vocal system. When she is angry, the teacher does not raise the pitch of her voice, because she knows that this is interpreted by the class as panic and usually leads to greater disruption in the classroom. The teacher displays anger by making her voice louder and deeper.

In cold weather, the teacher is always careful to wear a scarf to protect her throat from the cold. Teachers, particularly in primary schools, are constantly in close contact with children and are exposed to all the bacteria and viruses which children bring to school. Every winter the teacher has an anti-influenza injection and takes vitamin supplements to boost her immunity to illness.

Teacher Talk for students

Students of all ages are often asked to give short presentations to their class, the parents or to the whole school. Many of the strategies and techniques mentioned above can be taught to students to help them to become effective public speakers in their L1 and in English.

Teachers can contribute their advice as part of their training to students preparing presentations. They can also make comments and give advice whilst giving feedback following a presentation.

Public speaking, presentation skills and voice training are useful communication skills for all students. Since they will often be using English to communicate with other non-native speakers of English, they should also think about using carefully planned comprehensible language.

For further reading:

HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH by Jeremy Harmer

HOW TO TEACH SPEAKING by Scott Thornbury

LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH

COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION – a guide for language teachers by Richard Johnstone CiLT 1989

For examples of projects and presentations

ENERGY by Steve Elsworth and Jim Rose

CUTTING EDGE by Sarah Cunningham and Peter Moor

INTELLIGENT BUSINESS by Irene Barral, Christine Johnstone, Tonya Trappe, and Graham Tullis

MARKET LEADER by David Cotton, Simon Kent, David Falvey, Iwonna Dubicka, Margaret O'Keefe

ⁱ COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTION by Richard Johnstone CiLT 1989 CiLT is the Centre for Language Teaching and Research, an organisation for foreign language teachers in Britain. Although the organisation is largely for teachers of French, German, Spanish, Italian and other foreign languages studied in British schools, their work is often relevant to EFL teachers around the world.

