Cambridge English

Being Strategic: Adult Learners and Speaking
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Most adult learners who enrol in an English language course are keen to learn how to speak the language. While it is important for them to develop listening, reading and writing skills, speaking is frequently a priority. In twenty-first century English classrooms, teachers more often than not provide their learners with a good array of speaking activities in the form of discussions, information gap activities and the like. These activities can provide practice of target grammar, vocabulary and functional language, and can also offer learners spoken fluency practice. However, the skill of speaking involves more than just production of oral language. In the process of developing speaking skills, it's useful if adult learners can learn to become effective communicators in English as well.

Speaking in the classroom

Before investigating what we mean by effective oral communication, it is useful to outline typical classroom speaking activities and to think about what their aims.

Many lessons begin with some kind of *lead in* activity. While aiming to prime learners for the content or context of the lesson, it also usually aims to provide *spoken fluency practice*. In other words, learners practise speaking without worrying too much about specific language items and language accuracy. Spoken fluency practice can also take place at other stages in a lesson. For example, learners might read or listen to a text and respond to the information in the text be expressing their opinion or perhaps personalise the content by responding to a question like: *What would you do in that situation?*

However, a lot of speaking activities are connected with the practice of language (grammar, vocabulary and functional language) that a teacher is focusing on. This oral practice can range from being very controlled (such as a drill) through to something that is much freer (such as a role play). When oral practice is highly controlled, learners are usually repeating an example utterance or changing it slightly. The aim is often to focus on producing a good phonological model of the language so that learners practise pronunciation as well as the target grammar (or vocabulary). When practice is freer, learners are adding more language of their own and the focus is more on fluency rather than accuracy.

The design of a practice activity can affect the degree to which a learner's language production is controlled, as can the instructions and the way in which the activity is set up. A large majority of these activities contain an *information gap* element (each learner in a pair knows something that the other learner does not and this gives them a reason to talk) or a *discussion* element (learners have different opinions or experiences). Irrespective of the degree of control, all these activities have a core aim: the practice of language items which provide learners with a useful opportunity to put recently learnt language items into productive use. It can also provide teachers with useful information about learners' acquisition of new language items.

These different speaking activities usually involve interaction between learners. However, none of them necessarily focus on the interactional nature of spoken language. In order to find out what we mean by this, let's briefly examine the nature of second language spoken language.

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The nature of spoken language

Goh and Burns (2012) provide a useful description of characteristics that comprise "second language speaking competence":

1. Knowledge of language and discourse
2. Core speaking skills
3. Communication strategies

(Goh and Burns 2012: 53)

These characteristics can, in turn, be broken down into more discrete micro-skills:

Characteristic	Sub Skills
Knowledge of language and discourse	phonological knowledge, lexical knowledge, grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge
Core speaking skills	production of pronunciation, performing speech functions (requests, offers etc.), interaction management, discourse organisation of extended spoken texts
Communication strategies	cognitive strategies (e.g. paraphrasing. circumlocution), metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning speaking), interaction strategies (e.g. checking comprehension, repeating an utterance)

(Goh and Burns 2012: 54 - 66)

At first glance, there appears to be overlap between the first two characteristics. However, it is important to note that the first characteristic is concerned with knowledge *of* language while the second characteristic focuses on the implementation of that knowledge when speaking. There are also similarities between the core speaking skills of interaction management and interaction strategies (a sub-skill of communication strategies). While this may be the case for a few sub-skills, it is worth bearing in mind that interaction management is more concerned with the active management of a conversation or discussion while an interaction strategy is more typically used when there has been some kind of misunderstanding resulting in a breakdown in communication. Goh and Burns note that these sub-skills of speaking are interdependent and second language speakers are likely to need to deploy different sub-skills at the same time (Goh and Burns 2012: 52).

Thornbury (2005) also breaks speaking down into a series of sub-skills such as conceptualising and formulating information, articulation, self-monitoring and fluency. In line with Goh and Burns, he acknowledges the importance of language knowledge and emphasises the importance of *extralinguistic knowledge*. In effect, this is what second language speakers know about a particular topic or the cultural knowledge that they might assume that the person (or people) they are speaking to might know (Thornbury 2005: 11-12). Thornbury also discusses *interaction management* using the term *managing talk* (Thornbury 2005: 8) as well as referring to *communication strategies* (Thornbury 2005: 29)

When we compare Goh and Burn's and Thornbury's descriptions of second language spoken competence with our description of classroom speaking, it becomes immediately apparent that sub-skills associated with interaction management and with interaction strategies are missing. We see the development of these sub-skills as central to the interactional nature of spoken language. Rather than make a distinction between the terms *interaction management* and *interaction strategies*, we will use the term *interaction strategies* to refer to both for the rest of this article.

One of the reasons that we feel that interaction strategies are not dealt with in English language classrooms is that many teaching materials take a limited view of the nature of speaking. They usually offer plenty of opportunities for learners to speak with personalised language practice or fluency activities. However, if they contain a speaking syllabus, it is typically a list of language functions, and interaction strategies are not usually included.

Interaction strategies

What exactly are interaction strategies? They are small chunks of language that allow speakers to do something in a conversation or a discussion. They often provide the answer to a *How can I …?* question that a learners might have in her mind. For example, how can I get someone's attention? or how can I signal that I'd like to say something in this discussion? These expressions and the way in which they are deployed tend to differ between languages.

Below are some examples of the kind of language we mean:

Strategy	Example utterances
1 Changing what you want to say	No wait
2 Checking what other people say	Are you sure?
3 Asking someone to wait	Just a minute.
4 Showing interest	Really?
5 Breaking off a conversation	I must run
6 Keeping to the topic of the conversation	Anyway, to go back to …
7 Responding to an idea	Yes, that makes sense.
8 Taking a turn	If I could just say …

This is a very small and random sampling of interaction strategies. However, looking more closely at these examples, some key points become evident. A lot of this language is idiomatic in nature and the literal meaning of the language changes when it is used in context as an interaction strategy. For example, in the first utterance a speaker who is changing her mind does not want her interlocutors to wait in a literal sense. It is more likely that the phrase would be said to herself, but interlocutors would know that the speaker is thinking and about to change her mind. In example 5, the speaker may not actually run having completed the conversation. However, the interlocutor understands that the speaker has to finish the conversation and leave.

Importance for adult learners

We believe that a focus on this kind of language answers real-world needs of adult learners. As we have noted above, there is often a mismatch between the literal and contextual meaning of this language. Adult learners may not automatically understand these chunks of language when they are in an English speaking environment. In a very simple, real-world context such as checking into a hotel, a second language speaker might hear or perhaps use the first three strategies from our list above. This shows that it is useful to focus on this language for both receptive and productive purposes. It also suggests the value of focusing on interaction strategies at low levels.

Many adult learners study English because they need it in workplace settings, where they communicate with English-speaking colleagues. These learners would benefit from a wide repertoire of strategic language, in order to be able to communicate effectively. Conversely, some adult learners follow an English course in preparation for some kind of further study in an English-medium environment. While English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes usually provide some kind of focus on interaction strategies, it helps if learners have already had some kind of exposure to this kind of language.

Focusing on speaking strategies in the classroom

A first step is finding material that contains examples of interaction strategies. This is likely to be some kind of dialogue or listening material. It is worth checking the tape scripts of the course book that you are using. While this language is often not focused on, it is sometimes included in dialogues. An alternative is to write or improvise your own listening dialogues that contain examples of interaction strategies.

As a general approach we suggest the following:
1 Make sure learners understand the context in which the language appears
2 Focus on the meaning of the strategic language as it is used in context
3 Highlight any key aspects of form (for example, in example 6 above, the strategy expression would normally be followed by a noun phrase)
4 Highlight any aspects of pronunciation that are important (for example, in example 4 above a learner will not sound very interested if her intonation is flat)
5 Provide some kind of controlled practice such as gapped mini dialogues or guided dialogues and make sure they are used for oral (rather than written) practice
6 Provide learners with role play / discussion scenarios where they can produce this language themselves.

Focusing on interaction strategies does not necessarily require a radical change to methodology. This language can be dealt with in a similar way that you might focus on grammar or functional language.

However, here are two extra ideas that you might like to try out with your learners. They are both suitable for a range of levels:

1: Personalised surprise
- Give a series of facts about yourself (on PowerPoint) and ask learners to choose the ones they find surprising.
- Elicit how they could respond with (a) all-purpose phrases (e.g. *Really?*) (b) echo Qs (e.g. *Have you?*).
- Focus on intonation.
- Get learners to write a few facts about themselves they think will be surprising. They tell their partner and respond with surprise and find out more.
You could use the same technique for showing interest or sympathy, finding points in common, responding to an idea or checking that they've understood.

2: What's next?
- Use a standard dialogue which contains interaction strategies. Play (or show) it line by line, pausing and asking students to predict what the other person will say.
- Then play (or show) the next line to check and ask why she says that (e.g. she isn't sure, she's surprised, she wants time to think).
- Show the dialogue on a handout with gaps and get participants to complete them.
- Play to check.

In summary, we are not suggesting that teachers change the speaking activities they already do in the classroom. It is more a question of amplifying that solid core and including some work on interaction strategies as well. This will strengthen learners' speaking skills and provide them with more learning opportunities that should support them when they have to speak in real-world situations.

References

Goh, C.C.M. & A. Burns (2012) *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
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