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Reasons to speak in ELT classes: personal reflections on the drivers of spoken discourse

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Abstract: Speaking is a difficult skill to teach and a source of anxiety for many language learners. Both transactional and interactional speaking make demands on the confidence and gregariousness of students in ways that the other skills do not. However, some classroom activities do motivate Japanese university students to speak English in the language classroom. Why do these activities succeed? **Aim:** This paper considers what common factors – if any – lie within such activities and whether knowledge of these factors can enhance teaching practice. **Method:** Activities which prompt students to speak in the target language in class time – not necessarily planned speaking exercises – were considered as to why they should do this in the light of ELT literature. **Observations:** Having a *personally held* reason to speak is the greatest driver of students to engage in speech. Activities in other skills classes which encourage speaking should be scrutinized for any insights they provide on this skill. Both planned and spontaneous transactional English in the classroom are valuable practice en route to naturally occurring dialogue; this strengthens the case for maximum exposure to the target language.

Key Words : English Language Teaching, speaking, interactional/transactional speech

Introduction

The scope of this paper has a restricted scale in that it is conducted primarily with an interest in my own teaching context: it is written for critical reflection and personal development. However, as I teach English in various programs at Japanese universities, it could be of interest to teaching professionals in similar situations. My interest in teaching speaking stems from the difficulty in replicating classroom environments that consistently promote spoken dialogue between students; it is, perhaps, not unusual to refer to whole classes as being either better or worse speakers than comparable classes. However, this could seldom be said about the disposition of any one class to write essays, read books or listen to spoken texts. Speaking is the skill which is most constrained or relaxed by class

cultures – and remains the skill, as O’Sullivan (1996) wrote, “where every utterance is a possible mistake, and therefore a transgression of the rules” (p. 109).

A second interesting aspect of English speaking in the classroom is that it is not only planned speaking activities that drive spoken discourse. Certain activities in reading, writing and listening classes are consistent in producing spoken English, almost as a by-product. This is acknowledged here for three important reasons:

1. In practical language usage, auditory (listening/speaking) and visual (reading/writing) channels often operate in combination. It is therefore desirable to prepare for this in the language classroom.
2. Teachers and students should acknowledge

and take satisfaction from target language speaking outcomes whenever they occur.

3. Transactional speech to get things done in, for example, a writing class not only demonstrates progress to students and the utility of the target language but is possibly a stated aim of the course i.e. preparation for overseas study or later courses.

1 . Exercises that encourage speaking

1.1 Ideas from ELT literature

My background reading into speaking has also heightened my interest in teaching this skill. Ur's (1981) work on task-centred classroom discussion and her assertion that "students need a *reason* to speak more than they need something to speak *about*" (p.6) shows that my observations are not particularly original. However, her statement (ibid.) that "A task that cannot be done without verbal communication supplies learners with a reason to speak, and thus makes for a higher degree of naturalness and enthusiasm in their discourse" (p.24) is thought provoking. I do not oppose her position, but some verbal tasks I have set have not always given *my students* a reason to speak; the reasons have been good enough for *me* - though not always for the students. This has been particularly true of role-plays.

Ur's position has, for me, become a point of reference - and perhaps a challenge. I believe that reasons to speak are all important, but that they must be *personally held* by the students (speakers) themselves. Reasons to speak which only exist in the teacher's head are no reason at all; they are merely task requirements - and some students are reconciled to indifferent results in tasks. Yet, students do speak English in my classes and often without prompting - a common example would be students asking questions about a reading text for comprehension purposes. Though such questions are not unforeseen, the propensity of reading classes to generate speaking reasons and even discussions can seem ironic -

especially if carefully planned speaking exercises don't deliver in dedicated classes. So, further questions I am prompted to ask myself are:

1. Which of my classroom activities consistently cause speaking reasons to germinate within the students themselves and why?
2. Can an answer to the first question help me to improve or expand my repertoire of successful speaking activities?

The first of these questions ties in with my methodology for approaching this paper: listing and attempting to categorize classroom activities which encourage speaking. The second question has provided meaning and usefulness to my final observations.

1.2 A personal approach to the target

Teachers must have a vivid perception of what they are trying to achieve in a language class. For useful speaking practice, I want my activities to assist students beyond my classroom and help them participate in everyday discourse. 'Discourse' is simply defined for my purposes as connected and coherent conversation between two or more participants. However, building towards everyday English requires knowledge of natural spoken English and principled decisions about how to approach it in the classroom. Furthermore, if the teacher is already committed towards students having personally held reasons to speak, then classroom conversation already has one or both of the characteristics that Hoey (1991) emphasized as existing in natural conversation. Specifically, "in naturally occurring dialogue, a speaker has a great deal of choice as to what he or she does next." (p.81) and furthermore "people usually have something to say" (p.82).

These attributes are only two among eight that Hoey listed as present in naturally occurring dialogue. However, for me, they most emphasize the nature of the (student driven) speech we are trying to create. That is not to suggest I expect classroom dialogue to occur naturally, but rather

that genuine student-centered dialogue should mimic naturally occurring conversation *in these two respects*.

1.3 Recognizing non-naturalistic activities

Within ELT literature there are taxonomies of oral task types and Courtney (1996) gives an example of his own used for, among other things, distinguishing task types according to their goals. I attempt nothing so ambitious but am inspired to present classroom speaking activities in tabular form according to the type of discourse that I think they promote. When attempting to list classroom activities that generate naturalistic dialogue in the two respects detailed in 1.2 above, it was immediately apparent that some useful and reliable exercises – which require verbal communication – nevertheless could not be included. For this reason, and though it may appear a digression, I present non-naturalistic activities first in order that they are clarified at the outset. Three such types of exercise are listed in Table 1 for ease of reference and discussed briefly below.

The three types of activities listed in Table 1 are useful activities in dedicated speaking classes and might be used for the following four reasons:

1. They all result in the production of spoken English – giving students the opportunity to listen to themselves and each other using the target language.

2. They can be specifically tailored to target the needs of the class or syllabus requirements, particularly vocabulary and grammatical structures.
3. They are transactional and purposeful. Therefore, if used sparingly, they are often well-received by students and might be considered motivational. ‘Shadowing,’ for example, is a challenging exercise from the world of interpretation practice. For many students, it is their first experience of this engaging activity.
4. These activities are ‘elastic’ regarding time limits. Not only can they be lengthened when students are receptive, but they can be shortened or wound down completely if the response is less than spectacular.

As speaking class components, there is little to be said against these exercises. Indeed, when they are examined for students own personally held reasons to speak, such reasons *are* present – albeit in the short-term. However, these exercises are far from effective practice in naturalistic discourse; they don’t begin to approach the two traits of naturally occurring dialogue considered in 1.2 above. Therefore, they are unlikely to build students’ confidence as participants in naturally occurring dialogue and are worth distinguishing from realistic speaking exercises in a personal reflection on classroom practice.

Table 1. Useful activities that do *not* drive naturalistic discourse

	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Description</i>
1	Shadowing	Fluency practice that entails speaking quietly at the same speed as an audio text often with a typescript
2	Gravity	Exercises where standing students give the word or phrase in a text for which a teacher supplies hints or cues before sitting down
3	Various rejoinder exercises	Short role-plays in closed pairs or groups requiring deployment of specific grammatical structures or vocabulary/phrases

1.4 Naturalistic discourse drivers

Culling useful exercises from a potential list of strictly naturalistic activities can make the remaining list appear somewhat lean. A further observation is that many of these discourse drivers do not occur in dedicated speaking activities as such. Rather they occur within practice of the three other skills and even in the routine management of the class. They are listed in Table 2 as 'Incidental discourse practice' for want of a better term.

Some of the activities in Table 2 are most likely to occur in reading or writing classes and could easily be overlooked as speaking activities. However, in any appraisal of how much class time is spent practicing spoken discourse or especially

naturalistic dialogue they are too valuable to ignore. The diminutive list in Table 3 of planned exercises that occasion naturalistic dialogue is further reason to acknowledge the value of activities in Table 2.

No doubt, other teachers could add activities to Table 3, but it seems to me that naturally occurring dialogue is, by its very nature, difficult to mimic with activities designed for the purpose. Also, if ability in naturally occurring dialogue is an end goal of classroom practice, it may be appropriate that common assessment preparation exercises, assessments themselves and post-testing feedback all provide realistic practice at the culmination of the syllabus.

Table 2. Incidental discourse practice

	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Description and notes</i>
1	Class listening exercises that generate verbal responses	Typically conducted with the teacher at the whiteboard and much enhanced with phrases supplied so that students use complete sentences e.g. "I think I heard..." etc.
2	Team dictations	Only likely to produce genuine dialogue with teacher and group confirmation and discussion in the target language
3	Individual tutorials with essay work	One on one discussions and feedback between teacher and student or small groups
4	Reading comprehension questions	Most vocal as a class activity – excellent speaking practice though not dependable; texts may be easily understood
5	Questions and answers to clarify exercise or homework requirements	Not dependable as an exercise – yet a clear reason to speak and spontaneously occurring

Table 3. Explicitly planned naturalistic discourse practice

	<i>Activity</i>	<i>Description and notes</i>
1	'Speed-dating'	Closed pair speaking practice with strict time limits and rapid changes of partner
2	Actual assessments (presentations <i>with questions from the audience</i> , assessed conversation or interviews)	Notable for prohibition of teacher intervention which makes student language choices inevitable
3	Post-test feedback or particularly 'negotiation' between teacher and students on acceptable answers	Only available with 'low-stakes' internal testing or test practice where students' opinions and reactions are solicited

2. Considering commonalities

2.1 A transactional emphasis?

ELT literature on speaking consistently refers to interactional (socially motivated) speech and transactional (goal oriented) speech. Bailey (2003) states that “Speaking activities inside the classroom need to embody both [...] since language learners will have to speak the target language in both transactional and interactional settings” (p.56). Whether the activities in my tables embody both settings, I would argue they have an emphasis that is transactional rather than interactional.

The activities in Table 1 derive their transactional emphasis from the finite or immediate ‘goal-oriented’ nature of the tasks. With the incidental dialogue practice in Table 2, the realistic dialogue and transactional aspect comes from the students’ personal wish to clarify information. The Table 3 activities are transactional though the second item (which includes presentations) has ‘questions from the audience’ in italics as a proviso. This is to distinguish it from a third category of speech known as *talk for performance*. Richards (2008) reminds us that performance “tends to be in the form of monologue [and] is often evaluated according to its effectiveness or impact on the listener, something that is unlikely to happen with talk as interaction or transaction” (p.27). It seems to me that discourse driving activities in the classroom rely upon and share this transactional aspect – the reason to speak – that is readily apparent to students.

2.2 Transactions as a useful construct

An assertion that discourse driving activities are necessarily transactional is too extreme a position for this paper. However, to identify a transactional *aspect* in all speaking activities may be a useful construct for lesson planning purposes. As stated in 1.2 above, teachers require a vivid perception of an activity’s intended outcomes. This perception allows for clarity in the guidelines

given to students and – of great importance in speaking activities – principled planning of teacher intervention and anticipation of how and when it may be necessary.

Text 1. shows part of a ‘C-speaking’ exercise or in other words a partial deletion C-test that I use as a template for a group speaking activity rather than as an actual assessed test of English competence. I would classify this under item 3 of Table 3 above as a ‘negotiation’ exercise, and it is derived from part of the testing battery of the relevant course (British Culture and Society). The aim of the exercise – or rather the *supposed* aim for students – is to fill the deletions in the original 200-word text and to do so as quickly as possible (preferably competitively) by working with their teammates in English.

Text 1. C-Speaking (extract)

British people often say, “good morning” or “hello” when they meet. However, so___ young peo___, hug o_ kiss – i__ they kn___ each ot___ well, but ha___ not met f___ a wh___. However, it is___ common f___ men to hug or kiss ea___ other. One exce___ is when foot___ players hug ___ch other af___ the team has ___red a goal! (Adapted: Udagawa: 1996)

The real aim of the exercise is the emergence of spoken discourse in the completion of the task, and this depends upon a level of difficulty for students in completing the exercise. However, when that level is found, the opportunity for students to explain their choices – possibly against time constraints – leads to phonological and lexical errors in discourse which require repair. Lynch (1997) has convincingly argued that students can benefit significantly by being pushed, during repairs, to produce ‘comprehensible output’ (after the hypothesis of the same name). In doing so, he cites three case studies and notes that success requires that “the teacher’s role [is] supportive, rather than proactive” (p. 321).

For me personally, this supportive role is far easier to achieve with an apparently transactional exercise and there are two reasons:

1. The object of the students' discourse repair is apparent to the observing teacher.
2. The focus of the students with completing the exercise itself is a 'mask' to the speaking transaction with which students are actually grappling. The latter is really providing the reason to speak and the choice of words that we are seeking to provide (see 1.2 above) in classroom activities.

2.3 Limitations of the construct in planning activities

The example in 2.2 above shows, or at least argues, how discourse – possibly naturalistic discourse – might emanate from an explicitly limited transactional activity. However, it would be too ambitious to expect these results from all exercises with a transactional focus. The activities in Table 2 are a notable exception; they do not require teachers to find a transactional focus as they are inherently transactional (and naturally occurring) in the first place. They create attempts at (somewhat) naturalistic discourse in the course of practicing the three other language skills. However, it would be gratifying if the exercises in Table 1. could be enhanced in some way to also become drivers of naturalistic discourse.

This appears to be extremely unlikely or even impossible. They simply remain useful speaking activities for the four reasons given in section 1.3. However, the process of reflecting on types of classroom discourse can lead to a greater awareness of the utility in these exercises and the types of teacher talk and classroom communication that they do produce. Cullen (1998) argued against concluding that “the absence of features of communication characteristic of discourses in the world outside the classroom automatically renders classroom discourse *uncommunicative*.” (p.185). He instead makes the case for speaking in a ‘classroom context’ with its own (pedagogical)

communicative requirements. Using a brief transcription from an English lesson in Cairo, Cullen showed how teacher talk quite unlike real-world discourse succeeded in achieving the precise purposes of the lesson.

The argument is all the more compelling when we consider the role of listening comprehension in developing speaking skills. If students are unable to participate in naturalistic discourse at their current stage of learning, then an insistence on naturalistic discourse will not constitute effective teaching. As Kang (2002) stated, “If one cannot understand what is said, one is certainly unable to respond” (p.205). She goes on to list features of everyday spoken English which, while negotiable by native speakers, “undoubtedly hinders EFL learners' comprehension and affects the development of their speaking abilities.” (ibid.) I would concur with this and argue that we cannot run before we can walk; naturalistic discourse in the classroom is something to be practiced where possible rather than ‘enforced.’

3. Enhancing practice through reflection

3.1 Considering goals

In the course of reflecting on how teaching speaking skills might be enhanced, for me personally, activities that build skills for naturalistic discourse remain attractive. Table 2 in section 1.4 above demonstrates that I am willing to consider even the briefest of exchanges as naturalistic if students have something to say and a degree of choice in how they express themselves. However, unplanned snippets of discourse cannot constitute teaching goals and the few activities in Table 3 (1.4) seem unambitious if naturalistic discourse is a target of actual lessons. A useful question might be – how much naturalistic discourse is useful or desirable in any particular class? Should one be mindful of Cullen's arguments (op. cit.) and aim to build speaking classes that are communicative within their own context?

3.1.1 Limitation of goals

In discussing their suggested methods of promoting meaningful discussion skills in the classroom, Green, Christopher and Lam (2002) described a learner-centred approach which they suggested as being suitable for “most levels of learners, and for any type of course.” (p.226). The paper councils the development of learner autonomy so that: “learners develop a metacognitive awareness of the recursive nature of the learning process, [...] to help them to evolve into effective lifelong learners” (ibid.). The paper sets a bold goal for students’ speaking skills and brooks no excuses (such as large class sizes or lack of time) which it acknowledges as possible obstacles at the outset.

From my perspective the methodology they outline seems entirely feasible but is nonetheless a complete approach to teaching speaking and clearly requires careful planning at the stage of syllabus design. It is not a mere teaching trick or ‘twist’ that can be implemented overnight into existing speaking courses. However, the main value of their paper is its effect in forcing one to consider anew just what students might be capable of achieving. Encouraging students to become lifelong learners is an excellent long-term goal, but it goes beyond my purpose here of personal reflection on my current use of speaking activities.

4. Observations

As made clear at the outset, this paper describes reflections on my personal practice which have allowed me to re-evaluate how I categorize speaking activities. I had envisaged drawing distinctions between exercises that explicitly target spoken discourse and those which cause spoken discourse without prioritizing it. I also had a strong belief that worthwhile speaking activities in the classroom depend upon students having reasons to speak – and, critically, that those reasons must be personally held by the students themselves. In these two regards, the reflecting process has served as confirmation.

However, I had also expected to classify useful speaking activities within a carefully worded definition of realistic dialogue practice. This has not been the case. On reflection, there are some excellent speaking activities which can be regularly used in the speaking classroom, but which earn their place for their value in that context rather than as building realistic dialogue. So, to consider one of the questions posed in my introduction: will this affect my repertoire of successful speaking activities? Yes – for one thing it will enhance the distinction I draw between one eventual target (practice in naturally occurring dialogue) and a wide range of skill or knowledge building exercises that have value of their own.

Equally importantly, this reflecting process strengthens my conviction that all parts of a lesson should be taught in the target language. There are simply too few methods to practice naturally occurring dialogue for routine speaking opportunities in English to be either reduced or lost. The fact that these chances are to be found as often in reading and writing classes shouldn’t be a surprise, but they should be effectively acknowledged as speaking time. Should this be of interest to other teaching professionals in similar situations and were they to benefit from considering my opinion, then I would consider this paper worthwhile.

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