

Reflections on language teaching

Jack C. Richards

It's better the second time

Here is an example of an actual interaction between a student and a teacher in a low-level English class:

Teacher: So how was your weekend, Lim? ... What did you do at the weekend?

Student: I ... went to Chinatown.

Teacher: Oh, great. What day ... what day, Lim?

Student: Uh?

Teacher: On Saturday or Sunday?

Lim: Er, Saturday.

Teacher: Ah, fantastic. And who did you go with?

Lim: Er ... wife.

Teacher: With your wife?

Lim: Yes.

Teacher: Ah, right. Any friends?

Lim: No ... er ... wife ... go.

Teacher: Just the two of you?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Right. Was it good?

Student: (Laughs and nods).

The teacher then moves on to another student.

This example illustrates a number of difficulties involved in interacting with students with a limited speaking ability in English. The teacher has to work hard to keep the conversation going, and uses a number of strategies which are typical of "teacher-talk" or "foreigner-talk" (the kind of English we use when speaking to someone whose language proficiency is very limited). She restates an indirect question (How was

your weekend?) with a more direct one (What did you do at the weekend?). She provides the student with the words he can use in the answer. (What day? ... On Saturday or Sunday?). She also repeats the student's answer, providing a more grammatical model of what he said (With your husband ... Just the two of you?). The strategies the teacher uses are successful in that they enable the student to complete a conversational exchange about what he did on the weekend. However the conversation also demonstrates that it was the teacher, rather the student, who did most of the work. Since the activity did not require the learner to try to reformulate any of his sentences, opportunities were lost for him to learn very much from his and the teachers' efforts.

There are many similar instances in our language classes when students have an opportunity to use English but do not learn anything particularly useful from the experience. Indeed, it has been argued that while free-speaking or fluency activities are an important dimension of a conversation class, unless students also have the opportunity to practice using syntactically correct patterns at some stage in the lesson, we may inadvertently be helping them develop a pidginized variety of English. One way of minimizing this possibility is to make sure that when students take part in a fluency activity like the one above, they have a second chance of practicing the activity, but the second time round they practise it at a higher level of performance.

With an activity such as “Talking about the Weekend” for example, the students could first write out a statement of something interesting or unusual that happened to them or that they did over the weekend. (For example, “I went to a barbecue”). Students then take turns around the class reading their statements and their classmates must ask at least five follow-up questions. (For example, “When was the barbecue?” “Where was it?” “Who did you go with?”) The teacher provides immediate feedback to make sure that the students know how to ask and answer the questions with correct grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Then the students form small groups and repeat the activity, asking and answering questions about what they did on the weekend. This time the students are expected to handle the exchange with a better level of both accuracy and fluency and to self-correct any mistakes they make.

Another activity I find useful makes use of question sheets on topics of interest to the students, such as sports, entertainment, hobbies

etc. Each sheet contains ten or more questions which provide the basis for an initial discussion between the teacher and the students. During the first practice, feedback is given on the accuracy of the students’ responses. For the second practice, students work with partners but this time without making use of the question sheet. Now they have to try to recall the questions, adding other questions of their own if necessary, as well as responding to their partners’ responses with follow-up questions. (I also have recordings of interviews with native speakers using the same question sheets. These provide a useful follow-up listening activity). Activities like these are simple to set up and use and students enjoy them as well. They provide a good opportunity for students to practice their speaking skills and extend their vocabulary. But more importantly, by providing an opportunity for repeated practice of a task with a focus on the accuracy of what is said during the second practice, the activities help develop both fluency and accuracy rather than working on one at the expense of the other.

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