

LEARNING HOW TO FISH FOSTERING FLUENCY AND INDEPENDENCE

by *Constantinos Gabrielatos*

In this article I will focus on oral communication problems of Greek adolescent EFL learners at intermediate level. I will seek to identify the sources of the problems and then suggest ways of facilitating students to become more confident communicators.

THE PROBLEM

It seems that the majority of Greek EFL learners at intermediate level share a number of characteristics as regards their oral performance and their attitude towards it. Although they have been introduced to the main grammatical forms and their functions and possess a relatively wide (but mainly receptive) vocabulary ...

... they are reluctant to use the L2

for spontaneous interaction in the classroom (i.e. in class discussions and pair/group work).

... when they encounter any problems they tend to abandon their effort to communicate in the L2 and they resort to either the L1 or silence.

... they appeal (invariably in the L1) to the teacher to provide them with the "correct" lexical item or structure.

... they protest (again mostly in the L1) that they "can't say it". Their reasons are usually along the lines of: "We haven't learned it", "I don't remember the word", "I don't know how to say it correctly".

THE CAUSES

I will now examine the sources of the characteristics/problems mentioned above.

— Native speaker 'expertise'
There is a common belief among students that native speakers have full knowledge of their language and that their oral performance is impeccable. As a result, learners may feel intimidated by the idea that their performance will be measured against such standards of 'perfection'.

— The 'correct answer syndrome'
A similar shared belief is that there is one (and only one) 'correct' way of expressing a thought/idea, and that any deviation is an error (to be avoided). The learners are consequently very reluctant to experiment with the language, since they feel that the odds of 'getting it right' are against them.

— Negative training
The above can be ingrained/reinforced by teaching situations in which ...

... the only native models presented have been either written texts read aloud (eg. news bulletins) or scripted 'dialogues'/'interviews' delivered with unnatural accuracy/density of information.

... learners have been required to produce full responses at all times.

... the learners' interlanguage has been labelled as erratic performance and consequently the focus has been on accuracy with little/no tolerance of learners' attempts to experiment with the language.

... the status of redundancy in oral production is very low. That is, strategic use of pauses/fillers/repetition/restructuring is not encouraged

or even not acceptable. Greek readers will remember how they were penalised in secondary school if, when examined orally in class, they hesitated or repeated words/phrases (a 'clear' indication that they had not studied enough).

... exam training for the 'interview' component of the FCE (or similar) examinations has been limited to having learners describe photographs in painstaking (and unnecessary) detail (sometimes to the extent that the message is obscured and the listener distracted).

NATIVE ORAL PRODUCTION

It seems relevant to examine certain aspects of native oral production, since most learners' ultimate goal is to reach a near-native level of proficiency.

1. The syntax tends to be less complicated than in written language. Speakers tend to favour ...
- a. Parataxis: Phrases linked not by subordination, but by coordinating connectors (and, or, but), or even phrases not explicitly connected, but understood as being related to each other by the way they are uttered by the speaker in a given context.
- b. Ellipsis: Speakers omit elements of the sentence they feel are redundant - given the context and the shared knowledge of interlocutors (eg. utterances like 'Yesterday', 'On the top shelf').
2. The utterances are not always

grammatically correct (if the written medium is to be regarded as the norm of correctness).

3. As regards vocabulary, Aitchinson (1987, p.43) states that "the mental lexicon contains equipment which enables a person to continually expand old words and coin new ones". As an example, she offers the use of compounding by native-speaking children when they encounter vocabulary shortcomings (eg. 'sky-car' for 'plane'). Other methods of creating new words include affixation and conversion (discussed below).
4. Native speakers frequently encounter shortcomings while communicating orally (due to time/memory/vocabulary restrictions). Speakers may be lost for words, self-correct, or pause. Regarding pauses, in observations made by Goldman-Eisler (cited in Clark & Clark, 1977, p.262) of native speakers who were interviewed or asked to describe pictures it was found that "... most people paused between 40 and 50 percent of the time".

In order to compensate for these shortcomings, native speakers use fillers (i.e. phrases like 'well', 'you know'), paraphrase and restructuring (see below for details/examples).

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Similarly, the L2 learner can adopt and/or adapt native processes of compensating for shortcomings encountered during oral production. Such processes have been termed "communication strategies". "They can be viewed

as the speaker's attempt to communicate meaningful content, in the face of some apparent lacks in the interlanguage system" (Tarone, in Faerch & Kasper, 1983 p.62). Ellis (1986, p.165) states that "native speakers must be considered to use the same strategy types".

The communication strategies relevant to the aim of this article are achievement strategies (Ellis, *op.cit.*, p.184-85). They are employed by the learners when they feel that their linguistic resources are inadequate to carry them through a communicative task, but who, on the other hand, do not want to abandon their communicative goal. We will focus on non-cooperative achievement strategies, that is, strategies that do not require contribution from the interlocutor (Ellis, *loc. cit.*).

- * Substitution: Using an L2 lexical item the learner knows/can recall instead of the target item the learner does not know/cannot recall. Usually, a superordinate item is substituted for a hyponym (eg. 'animal' for 'giraffe'), or an item of similar meaning is used (eg. 'table' for 'desk').
- * Word-coinage: Producing a lexical item based on assumptions regarding the L2 rules of word-formation. The result may or may not be an existing L2 item.
- * Circumlocution: Offering a definition or description of the target item (eg. 'What bikers wear on their heads' for 'crash helmet'). Alternatively, the negation of an item/phrase of converse meaning can be used (eg. 'not light' for 'heavy').
- * Restructuring: The learner

realises that he/she is unable to finish his/her utterance as it was initially intended and tries again using more manageable means (structure/lexis-wise) without abandoning his/her communicative goal.

PROPOSAL

What is being proposed below aims at facilitating learners to utilise their linguistic resources and increase their confidence/risk-taking.

* Awareness

Learners need to be made aware of ...

... the shortcomings of

spontaneous native oral production, as well as the strategies utilised by native speakers in order to deal with them.

... other features of spontaneous native oral production such as the use of pauses, fillers, repetition, rephrasing.

... the most common processes of word-formation in English, that is compounding (usually a combination of two nouns, eg. apple-juice), conversion (converting one part of speech into another, eg. run [verb + noun]), affixation (the addition of prefixes/suffixes to existing words, eg. unusual/usually).

* Practice

The learners should be given the opportunity to practise (i.e. experiment with) using these strategies and incorporating the characteristics of spontaneous oral production mentioned above into their own speech. First, authentic (or authentic-sounding) oral texts can be used to elicit

and/or exemplify these features. The above strategies/features should then be evaluated as regards their communicative success in terms of both the native 'model' presented and the students' own experience in using them. Through such a process, the learners will be enabled to form a first hand opinion on the benefits of adopting these features, and through a 'hands on' approach, they will be able to select the ones that best suit their style/personality and incorporate them into their oral production. Furthermore, the teacher should not just tolerate but encourage any learners' attempts at creative improvisation through word-building.

I would like to argue that such awareness-raising in combination with practice/experimentation will help learners become more confident and successful communicators. As Faerch and Kasper (1983, p.32) put it, "... a learner who has gone through a stage of conscious analysis of a given problem in a given context ... and a conscious establishment of a plan geared at its solution might be better capable of applying such 'strategic' knowledge to new situations in a creative and efficient way".

Reservations: Tarone and Yule (1989, p.118) claim that "it is possible ... that once learners have developed communication strategies that enable them to say what they want, they may lose the motivation to produce more grammatically accurate forms". A quote from Faerch and Kasper (1983, p.54) can be used as a counter-argument: "A basic condition for communication

strategies to have a potential learning effect is that they are governed by achievement behaviour ... Those compensatory strategies by means of which the learner extends his resources without abandoning the IL [interlanguage] system completely can lead to hypothesis formation as the first step in the L2 learning process". It should be added that what has been proposed does not necessarily have to take up whole lessons. The activity types presented below can be incorporated into input/skills sessions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CLASSROOM

Below, I will suggest activity types consistent with the proposal made above. I will distinguish between awareness and practice activities.

* Awareness

1. Learners are recorded while they carry out an information gap activity (eg. describe and draw; describe and arrange; find similarities/differences), or an opinion gap activity (in which they have to exchange views/ideas), or a reasoning gap activity (in which they have to reach a decision or solve a problem). The students then listen to the recording and are asked to evaluate their performance and state/discuss any difficulties they encountered and any strategies they used in order to deal with them.

It may be that available facilities and/or the classroom size make recording problematic. In this case, one or two students in each group can play the role of the observer and take notes on the features

focused upon, i.e. use of circumlocution, word-coinage, rephrasing/restructuring, fillers, etc. (adapted from Nolasco & Arthur). When the focus is on circumlocution/word-coinage, the teacher should see to it that the learners have to communicate items/meanings for which they do not know the L2 equivalent.

2. The learners listen to native speaker oral production and are asked to identify certain features/strategies through their linguistic (or even non-linguistic, eg. 'erm', 'um') realisation. The teacher then elicits the function/usefulness of the features/strategies identified. More expressions through which the feature/strategy focused upon is realised can be elicited/provided.

* Practice

1. Substitution/Circumlocution: In an adaptation of charades students (in opposite teams) have to describe a word/expression. Successful attempts win a point for the team.
2. Circumlocution/Rephrasing: Students are given strips of paper with a sentence on each. In every sentence a word/expression is underlined. In pairs, students have to communicate the message without using the underlined word/expression. Feedback is immediate as their partners have to come up with the underlined item(s). Only then can a strip be discarded. The teacher should see to it that the words/expressions to be circumlocuted/rephrased are well within the students' competence. This is a coo-

peration activity since the winner is the pair to discard all their strips first.

3. Fillers: Students are asked to note down personal/awkward questions to ask each other. When asked, students have to try to delay the actual reply for as long as possible using fillers.
4. Word-building: Students (in opposite teams) are given a set of dominoes on which there are words and/or affixes. The rules are the same as in the original game, with the only addition that the players have to explain the change that each word undergoes when combined with a prefix/suffix. (From Rinvoluceri, 1985). Alternatively the "dominoes" could have nouns which can or cannot be compounded. Each pair of teams should be allocated a dictionary in case there are challenges.

* Holistic activities

The activity types mentioned in the 'awareness' section can offer students the chance to incorporate/experiment with the features/strategies presented, discussed and evaluated in the awareness stage. In addition, the same activities can be recorded and used for feedback/evaluation.

CONCLUSION

Awareness, practice and evaluation regarding achievement strategies and features of spontaneous native oral speech can initiate a virtuous circle: As learners shed their inhibitions they become more willing to take risks and experiment with the language. When they experience success at meaningful oral communication, their confidence

increases, and so does their motivation to go on learning.

I would like to finish by clarifying that activities instigating the virtuous circle described above should not be treated as supplementary/slot activities, but should form an integral part of the syllabus.

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