

Teaching Spoken English as a Process

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The teaching of writing in both the mainstream and ESL classroom has undergone a revolution in the last ten to fifteen years as the focus has moved from product to process. We propose that learning to speak in a second language also benefits from a process approach and that comparable techniques to those used in the writing classroom can be adapted to the speaking classroom. Just as the writing process focuses on individual conferencing and collaborative learning, with support from journals, so should the speaking process revolve around these two techniques.

The very act of writing is now seen as a method of discovering and acquiring knowledge (Emig 1971; Murray 1980) that is basically recursive in nature (Perl 1980). No longer is the writing classroom simply a place where the teacher lectures to novice writers and novice writers, in turn, assemble a product based on this information. Now young writers come to understand the on-going processes behind the product; processes that involve composing, reviewing and rewriting a text (Lindemann 1987).

In ESL writing classrooms process-oriented instruction has made remarkable inroads and has been championed by researchers and teachers such as Zamel (1976, 1982) Raimes (1985), and McKay (1984). However, while the teaching of writing to ESL students has benefitted from this revolution, the teaching of speaking to ESL students has been largely untouched by it.

The parallel between the writing and speaking process has been pointed out by Murphy (1991), among others. He notes that the complexity of speaking is similar to that of writing. He then lists activities to encourage a process approach. However, without feedback, his activities are simply products. Murphy (1991) does not explain how a process can be established in the spoken English classroom, nor does he provide the processing component of the activities he suggests.

The Role of Feedback

The essential element of many process-oriented activities is timely and comprehensible feedback as Moffett (1986) has emphasized in his research. In the speaking process, feedback is equally as important. Students should receive frequent and substantive feedback on their speaking, which can be accomplished through audio or video taping in conjunction with teacher conferencing and peer critiquing. Throughout the course, students should maintain journals.

Murray (1982) has specified at least three key qualities that are also relevant to the speaking process. Students and instructors need to have tangible, in this case audio or video, material present. Likewise, the sessions need to be frequent but short enough so that students can focus on specific problems. Finally, the scope of these problems needs to be narrow enough so that students are not overwhelmed.

One way of injecting a process component into the speaking classroom is by adapting the revising model to speech activities. Bartlett (1982) has pointed out that revision is an essential element in writing that demands an ability to re-see and reshape a text. Teaching revising becomes a key element in writing courses as Lindemann (1987) points out because inexperienced writers often lack the basic skills necessary to improve a piece of writing. In the speaking classroom the language learner also needs to develop a sense of revising to eventually improve speaking ability. That is, she needs to develop a monitoring process that helps her rehear and reshape utterances. Students receive both direct and indirect error correction, but in a way that guides them to discovering their own errors and anticipating future errors.

Just as writing research has discovered that simply marking the errors on a product does not lead to error correction and improvement in future production (Sommers 1982), commenting on speech events is not sufficient for improvement to occur. Instead, a process is necessary by which the instructor can meet with students to go over the material, with students discovering, identifying, and correcting their own errors. In speaking, this process can be achieved through the use of audio and video tapes. The instructor asks students to identify specific problems, giving more clues if students have difficulty. Instead of pointing out all problems, the instructor concentrates on only a limited number, beginning with those that most interfere with communication, that is, the global errors (Burt 1975). Later in the process, attention is given to local errors that, while not interfering with understanding, do detract from the presentation. To increase the benefits of conferencing, the instructor can meet with two students, focusing on the work of one while allowing the second to partake in the experience.

Another way that students can obtain feedback is through peer work. Much research in first language writing suggests that collaborative learning—either in large groups or small groups—is an effective writing activity in developing an inexperienced writer's ability to offer constructive criticism that can guide revisions (Williams 1989). Again, video and audio taping are used to capture the spoken English production. This material can be obtained through the taping of class discussions, short presentations, dramas, debates, or other classroom activities. If classes are too large for all students to participate, classes can be split into different groups for the critiquing sessions. By using audio recorders or single unit VCR/monitor combinations, the instructor can obtain maximum flexibility for

groups viewing the tapes. Students can be guided through the critiquing process by using checklists and questionnaires, similar to those found in the writing classroom.

Homework assignments can also incorporate feedback. Students are required to produce material outside of class and to self-critique this material, subsequently handing it in for the instructor to review later. The instructor on a separate tape comments on students' observations and makes appropriate corrections. Without the use of expensive equipment, students alternate their own tape with the taped comments of the instructor. Students can also critique each other's work outside of class using their own audio or video equipment at home, or that available in the language laboratory. The instructor can provide the same checklists or questionnaires as used in class to help guide students through the critiquing process.

The advantages of mentoring have been pointed out by Cazden (1979) based on a Vygotskian model of learning (see Vygotsky 1978). Students build on the instructor or peer input, incorporating this knowledge into their own repertoire. While the feedback is direct in the conferencing and peer critiquing, it can also be indirect. Through the use of dialog journals students do orally what has shown to be beneficial in the writing classroom. Students communicate with other students or with the instructor (See MacDonald 1989). A dialog journal with native English-speaking students provides the additional advantage of cultural and linguistic input from a native-speaking peer. These journals are not graded, except perhaps for frequency or length. Instead, they present language forms that ESL students can use as models.

There are other uses of tape to enhance the speaking process. Students can submit lists of relevant vocabulary words from their field of study with an audio tape on which the instructor records the vocabulary, providing material for students to practice. Students can also use passages recorded by the instructor or other native speakers to listen to, practice reading, and then record in their own voice. This recording in turn can be critiqued by the instructor.

In the classroom, it is also possible for the instructor to provide nonobstrusive feedback during live discussions. Basically, the instructor checks to see if other students understand the comments of a specific student. If not, that student must clarify the material, improving pronunciation or rephrasing with the help of the instructor. Students can also be trained to monitor their own comprehension and to provide appropriate feedback to their fellow students who are not comprehensible.

Conclusions

The advantage of approaching speaking tasks with the same techniques as those used in writing is that effective feedback is provided. Unlike those attempts at improving spoken English that assume students will improve without correction or

those that provide only indirect correction, the incorporation of teacher conferencing and peer critiquing, with journals and other techniques common to the writing process classroom, provides a means for students to develop self-critiquing. While speaking is not something that normally can be reviewed, revised, and restated, recording provides these options. Students are able to examine and reflect upon their own speaking and that of others. They are able to suggest alternate ways of stating the material, changes in pronunciation or vocabulary, and other modifications that will enhance comprehensibility. Experience has shown the ESL profession that practice alone does not guarantee better oral proficiency. If the product is to improve, the process must be addressed.

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