

When Silence Isn't Golden—Teaching Learners to Use Conversational Fillers

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Arguably one of the most important contributions of linguistics to language teaching in recent years has been the research into the differences between written and spoken modes of communication. We now no longer apply the rules of written communication to spoken. We no longer view spoken English as a "cheaper," "sloppier" somehow less-than-legitimate version of the highly veneered and respected written mode. We now recognize that there are two broad categories or modes of communication—written and spoken—each characterized by its own rules, norms, conventions and patterns of usage—in fact, by its own grammar. Consequently, we now teach listening skills using materials that reflect our understanding of spoken language (Carroll 1978, Brown 1977, Brown and Yule 1983, Chamberlain 1986).

The fact that each of these two categories—spoken and written language—may be subdivided into a range of mode types,

(Gregory and Carroll 1978: 47) need not concern us here. What is important is to re-assert the legitimacy of the spoken mode, and this is being done plentifully by all the recent work completed in the field of discourse analysis, conversational analysis, and speech acts. (Halliday 1985, Goffman 1981, Coulthard 1977, Goody 1978, Crystal and Davy 1975, Denham 1978, Larsen-Freeman 1980, Edmondson 1981, Gumperz 1982, Saviile-Troike 1982, Stubbs 1983, Basso 1970).

Running the risk of gross oversimplification, we may summarize some of the essential differences between the two modes in four areas (see Fig. 1).

Theory and Practice

Regretfully, however, there seems to be a "time warp" existing between the current state of research into linguistics and the practice of language teaching (Wajnryb

WRITTEN	SPOKEN
highly organized	apparently chaotic
linear	circular
economical	highly redundant
explicit	often implicit

Fig. 1. Differences between spoken and written modes of communication (Maley 1978)

1985). Teachers still use the language of postcards as input for a listening lesson. There are still those who hand out written copies of the spoken text to "help" their students, either in the lab or in class. Many coursebook writers still fail to stipulate that listenings should be unaccompanied by tapescripts. There are still course books very much in use which present language of the written-meant-to-be-read mode as listening input (e.g. *Streamline English Connections*, Unit 68).

The Learner's Attitude to Spoken Language

If some teachers and coursebook writers are lagging behind, then the learners themselves are, in the main, miles off the mark in their understanding and appreciation of what understanding spoken language entails. In fact, many language learners might well be considered to be the most conservative of species! Their linguistic conservatism may be summed up under three headings: ignorance, background and prejudice.

Ignorance

Most language learners are ignorant of matters linguistic, that is, they are laymen in the face of a highly specialized discipline. This is inevitable, as inevitable as the lay patient in the face of the professional medical practitioner. They therefore inevitably think that "English is English" and writing is speaking and are not at all aware of the different patterns that characterise the two modes.

Background

Many language learners hail from an educational and cultural background in which

the written language is venerated as the (only) language model. Their learning style naturally tends to derive from this background. Hence, for example, most Japanese and Polish learners of English have had extensive exposure to written English but usually pitifully little to the spoken word.

Prejudice

Given ignorance of linguistics and different cultural and educational models, it is almost inevitable (despite the advent and primacy of the audio recorder) that learners bring to their learning context a great deal of prejudice against spoken language.

This article will focus on only one of many characteristics of spoken discourse, that is, the use of conversational fillers.

The prejudice against such fillers that I have encountered in teaching is quite astonishing. Many learners interpret them to be overt indicators of a wide range of phenomena, such as low education, sloppy habits, working class status, poor self-esteem, lack of respect, among others.

They fail to recognise the fact that fillers are an inherent part of spoken language, absolutely integral to the process of spontaneous encoding. They fail to recognise the functions fillers serve in allowing a speaker time to encode, to improvise, to plan the subsequent utterance, to draw attention and lay emphasis, to implicate the interlocutor, to hold the floor while "thoughts are being gathered." Nor do they appreciate that if native speakers have this need, how much greater is the need of the non-native speaker? They fail to realise that often the only alternative is silence, and that silence in conversation is

culture-specific and semantically valuable in that it carries a meaning and conveys a message to one's interlocutor (see, for example, Basso 1972). They fail to realise that "far from being superfluous, these forms have a practical utility and represent a significant part of linguistic behaviour" (Sharma 1987: 22).

Eroding the Prejudice

If learners are going to begin adopting better learning habits in regard to speaking and listening, and if they are going to be more receptive to the linguistically-aware language teacher's approach, then we need to consider ways by which we can erode their prejudice against the spoken word so as to facilitate better learning. A crash course in linguistics is, of course, an unrealistic option, but there are other ways to achieve this goal. Three techniques that I have used with success are outlined below.

Sensitization

One technique I have tried with success is to sensitize learners to the nature of the spoken word by having them "listen-for-a-purpose" to tapes of spontaneous language, usually conversational dialogue. Traditional comprehension-type questions are kept to a minimum. Instead, attention is directed to such phenomena as fillers, pauses, repetitions, false starts, changes in speed and volume, etc. Continued exposure to real spoken language, combined with continued attention focused on its real characteristics will considerably aid learners' sensitization process.

"Shock" Exposure

Another technique I have used is to record learners engaged in verbal interac-

tions, transcribe snippets of the discourse, and subsequently expose the learners both aurally and visually (through the written transcript) to the reality of their language. During the analysis stage, attention is drawn to places in the interchange where fillers should have been used, or were used but inappropriately, or where silence carries an unintended (perhaps hostile) message. This technique is more "shocking" to the learner, but when used alongside the sensitization approach outlined above, can be a very effective tool.

Self-awareness

The third technique is actually an offshoot of the second. Close analysis of the learners' tapescripts usually yields the somewhat ironic finding that learners are using fillers but often the wrong ones.

Sometimes what happens is that learners translate an L1 filler into its English counterpart: thus the Spanish-speaking learner who uses "but" not as a contrast marker but as a filler; and the Russian-speaker who uses "so" not as cause-effect marker but again, as a filler. What such students need to realise is, firstly, that they do use fillers in their native language and that it's fine to do so; and secondly, that fillers, being equally functional in English, must be English-based, not first-language translations.

Then again there is the learner who overuses "ums", "ahs", "ehrs" with which he holds the floor and so contributes, if unwittingly, to his interlocutor's rising irritability level. Such a learner needs to be made aware of his need for more appropriate (less monopolizing) conversational strategies.

Teaching Conversational Fillers

Apart from employing sensitization and "consciousness-raising" exercises such as those described above, we also need to *actively* teach learners to use conversational fillers accurately and appropriately. In other words, we can't stop at having given our learners a conceptual grasp of the functions of fillers and a positive, receptive attitude towards them. We also have to provide linguistic input and opportunity for practice and correction. What follows below is the outline of a lesson I have used after I have eliminated—or rather, eroded—ignorance and prejudice. Its purpose is to provide input, opportunity to try out language, and corrective feedback for efforts made.

Input

In the first step, I write up on the blackboard a list of the most common conversational fillers (see Fig. 2 for some samples). Then I go through the list with the students with a number of purposes in mind: to see if the terms are familiar to them, to drill where necessary the correct phonology ("sorta", not "sort of"), to explain where necessary the difference between the terms as fillers ("That man, you know, will be visiting us today") and as semantically loaded lexemes ("The man you know will be visiting us today"), and to check for incorrect use of fillers ("d'you know" for "you know"; "isn't it?" for "is that right?").

Practice

Following the input phase, I make available on a central table a pile of cards on each of which is written one topic, which is both interesting and difficult,

- I think
- you know, you know what I mean,
- you see, do you see what I mean?
- um, eh, ah
- sort of, sort of thing
- well
- then, and then
- what I mean is
- O.K.
- right
- really

Fig. 2. Some conversational fillers

such as opera, electricity, nuclear physics, mushrooms, (see Fig. 3 for a list of these). A student is called upon to come and select a card at random (the topics are not on view). He returns to his seat, reads the card, and then announces to the class the topic he has drawn. His immediate task then is to speak spontaneously for one minute on his topic, relying on the

opera
 electricity
 nuclear physics
 mushrooms
 bicycles
 pornography
 housework
 Chinese
 adolescence
 bush-walking
 bees
 plumbers
 vegetarianism
 youth hostels

Fig. 3. Some topics for one-minute monologues

fillers on the blackboard to help him out. He might start off something like this:

Um, electricity is not really um the sort of thing that I really know ah—a lot about, you know. Of course, I use it, like really, well, everyone does, but I don't really know a lot about it, sort of thing.

Comment

Quite obviously the topics listed are ones that most would not be very familiar with. In fact, it would be unfortunate if an opera buff picked up the "opera" card, as we are relying on the need for fillers to "use up" the one minute's talking time.

The teacher should not correct the learner "midstream" through the talk, but make notes of the most important aspects of the "filler use" (e.g., mispronunciations, over-use of certain terms, inappropriate use etc.). At the end of each talk or towards the end of the lesson, the teacher should provide the necessary individual feedback to the learners.

This lesson could be re-scheduled a number of times throughout a course to allow for more practice opportunities. (Change the topics if they become too familiar). The goal is to have the students using fillers more efficiently and expertly each time.

Limitations

There is no denying that this exercise in the use of fillers is characterized by a great deal of artificiality. This is so primarily because the opportunity to practice the language in question occurs in a monologic context whereas, as the title of this arti-

cle suggests, our ultimate aim is the effective use of conversational fillers. Clearly here, in the practice of this exercise, we have none of the contingencies of an interactive or dialogic environment—such as, turn-taking, turn-yielding or any other discourse factors that require a speaker to take into consideration his/her interlocutor(s).

Nonetheless, despite the artificiality of the exercise and its obvious limitations in simulating conversational reality, I still feel that it offers an effective first step towards the breaking down of inhibitions about the use of fillers as well as providing some practice in the actual use of them.

Summary/Conclusion

This article has concerned itself with the real nature of spoken language, focusing specifically on one small aspect of English conversation, the use of conversational fillers. The need to confront learners' ignorance and prejudice in this subject has been discussed, and suggestions have been made as to how this might be achieved.

It is the writer's hope that as more research explores the domain of natural spoken English, and as more application to classroom methodology is made known, language teachers will begin to see the limitations of traditional dialogue teaching as a pedagogic vehicle for the exposition of grammar, lexis and phonology, and will begin to explore ways of teaching the essentials of communicative conversational behaviour.

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