

# Overcoming the "Classroomese" Syndrome

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## Foreign Talk and Teacher Talk

Charles Ferguson (1971) was the first to identify "a kind of 'Foreigner talk,'" stylized speech used by speakers of a language when they address "outsiders who are felt to have limited command of a language or no knowledge of it at all." Foreigner talk is a sort of imitation, by the native speaker, of the way the language is spoken by the foreigner. As Ferguson notes, it resembles baby talk and Pidgin as a simplified language form. One prominent syntactic feature of foreigner talk is the absence of the copula, such as in the question, "Where ( ) Susan going now?"

A related, but different form of native speaker/learner speech is known as "teacher talk" (Cazden, 1979), a simplified form of speech often used by language instructors when teaching beginning and middle level students. Although foreigner talk and teacher talk share some characteristics such as exaggerated pronunciation, simplified vocabulary, and frequent use of repetition and paraphrase, there exists an important difference between the two: teacher talk is grammatical, and therefore an appropriate model for the language learner, whereas foreigner talk is not.

Foreigner talk: "You go to party tomorrow night? You will enjoy."

Teacher talk: "Are you going to the party?"

The party's tomorrow night at 6 p.m. It'll be fun. I think you'll have a good time."

Teacher talk is frequently redundant ("night" and "pm," "fun" and "good time") and meets the language student halfway, reinforcing what he has already learned while leading him onward to more complex language constructions and more difficult vocabulary. Foreigner talk is a bare-bones, pidgin-like speech with numerous grammatical and usage errors. Frequent exposure to foreigner talk can put the EFL student in the position of not being able to recognize standard spoken English. Moreover, if students wish to progress in their language study, they must at some stage unlearn much foreigner talk that they have already absorbed.

## Classroomese and Its Dangers

A third form of speech—related to, yet different from both foreigner talk and teacher talk—is "classroomese." Not yet identified by linguistics, classroomese is an impoverished form of speech that some teachers unthinkingly adopt in the classroom, and thus unthinkingly encourage their students to use. A few examples of this seemingly innocuous, but in fact, debilitating *lingua franca* are "Open your books," "Please repeat," "Next," and the all purpose student response of "I don't know."



Teachers use classroomese because it is expedient, and, of course, because they are in the immediate environment of the academic classroom. However, the aim of language teaching should be to introduce language as it is used in the "real world." The minimal vocabulary and speech patterns of classroomese deprive students of the chance to learn language as it is commonly spoken: classroomese strips from language a rich underplay of meaning and tone which is vital to communication.

### Language Register

Each language contains a variety of linguistic styles called "registers," which shift depending upon the context of the speech. Formality, audience, and topic all influence the choice of register. For example, when the topic of a conversation is "religion," word choice and sentence structure differ markedly from that of a less sensitive topic such as sports. In a formal setting, "I beg your pardon" may be the appropriate phrase for asking that a question be repeated, while in an informal setting, "Sorry?" or even, "Huh?" may be the best response.

Yet many teachers tell a student to "Repeat" or "Please repeat" when they don't hear the student's answer. What they really mean is "Could you speak a little louder?" Worse yet, teachers turn a blind eye when students themselves adopt such phrases. To teach only one register shortchanges language and hobbles learning.

One prominent linguist, Dwight Bolinger (1975), used synonyms of the word "intelligent" to illustrate the wide range of registers. The following terms have the same semantic meaning but differ

widely from informal to formal registers: "on the ball," "sharp," "brainy," "smart," "intelligent," "perceptive," and "astute."

By choosing particular words, altering word pronunciation and intonation, and by sometimes omitting parts of a phrase, speakers move unthinkingly among various registers. Gestures, eye contact, distance between speaker and listener, and other forms of body language can also express differences in register. Although obviously not a simple task for the student, learning to use registers is inseparable from genuine language acquisition.

Cultures differ radically in their use of language registers. Americans, for instance, are recognized for being informal in settings where Japanese would be extremely formal. At a corporate meeting in America, the vice presidents may possibly address the president by his first name. In Japan, even company workers of the same rank tend to use only family name when talking to each other.

### Teaching Registers of the Target Language

Although mastery of registers poses one of the greatest challenges to language students, students can in fact be taught to distinguish registers by learning how to key on cue words and by practicing different registers in succession.

The first step is to make students aware of registers. An instructor can explain at the beginning of class which general registers will be used during the lesson. For example, in a class devoted to more formal registers, appropriate responses could be written on the blackboard and contrasted with informal registers. Part of



the teacher student dialogue in the class might run something like this:

"Mr. Lee?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Would you please answer number seven?"

"I'm sorry. I don't know the answer."

"Ms. Chang, would you please answer that question?"

In a class emphasizing the more informal registers of speech one might hear this kind of exchange:

"Fernando?"

"Yeah?"

"Take number seven."

"Okay."

Repeated speaking and listening practice will help students to learn to sense the registers. In the process, they should be instructed in which setting a given register is likely to be used, such as at a faculty colloquium at a university, a football chalk talk, or a club meeting to plan a school dance.

Contrary to what many teachers expect, introducing the registers into the classroom does not usually bog the students down. In fact, since students can better visualize the supposed context of their communication, the quality of their speech often improves rapidly as their inhibitions drop and their imagination is brought into play. As students begin to recognize registers in English, they will naturally reflect on the registers in their first language, which in turn will help clarify their conception of registers in the language they are studying.

## Avoiding Classroomese

Classroomese is one of the archenemies of register discrimination and language fluency. How are students to learn basic language distinctions, for instance, when the teacher uses the catch-all phrase "Any questions?" to mean "Do you think you understand the material we've just covered?"; "Would you like more examples?"; or even "We're finished."

Squelching classroomese eventually offers the students the opportunity to learn to more accurately express themselves. "I don't know" may not actually be what the student wants to say, but rather, "I'm not sure," "I'm not prepared," or even "What question are we on?"

With time and patience, the instructor may come to hear dialogues such as this:

"What's the answer, Ali?"

"I'm not really sure."

"Go ahead and guess."

"The answer might be 'C.'"

"That's a pretty good guess, but I think the answer's different. What do you think Fatima?"

"I think it's 'A.'"

## References

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