WHAT MAKES SPEAKING DIFFICULT?

Again, Chapter 18 outlined some idiosyncrasies of spoken language that make listening skills somewhat difficult to acquire. These same characteristics must be taken into account in the productive generation of speech, but with a slight twist in that the learner is now the producer. Bear in mind that the following characteristics of spoken language can make oral performance easy as well as, in some cases, difficult.

1. Clustering

Fluent speech is phrasal, not word by word. Learners can organize their output both cognitively and physically (in breath groups) through such clustering.

2. Redundancy

The speaker has an opportunity to make meaning clearer through the redundancy of language. Learners can capitalize on this feature of spoken language.

3. Reduced forms

Contractions, elisions, reduced vowels, etc., all form special problems in teaching spoken English (see the section "Teaching Pronunciation" later in this chapter). Students who don't learn colloquial contractions can sometimes develop a stilted, bookish quality of speaking that in turn stigmatizes them.

4. Performance variables

One of the advantages of spoken language is that the process of thinking as you speak allows you to manifest a certain number of performance hesitations, pauses, backtracking, and corrections. Learners can actually be taught how to pause and hesitate. For example, in English our "thinking time" is not silent; we insert certain "fillers" such as *uh*, *um*, *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, *like*, etc. One of the most salient differences between native and nonnative speakers of a language is in their hesitation phenomena.

5. Colloquial language

Make sure your students are reasonably well acquainted with the words, idioms, and phrases of colloquial language and that they get practice in producing these forms.

6. Rate of delivery

Another salient characteristic of fluency is rate of delivery. One of your tasks in teaching spoken English is to help learners achieve an acceptable speed along with other attributes of fluency.

7. Stress, rhythm, and intonation

This is the most important characteristic of English pronunciation, as will be explained below. The stress-timed rhythm of spoken English and its intonation patterns convey important messages.

8. Interaction

As noted in the previous section, learning to produce waves of language in a

vacuum—without interlocutors—would rob speaking skill of its richest component: the creativity of conversational negotiation.

MICRO- AND MACROSKILLS OF ORAL COMMUNICATION

In the previous chapter, 17 micro- and macroskills for listening comprehension (adapted from Richards, 1983) were presented. Here, many of the same skills apply, but because of major cognitive and physical differences between listening and speaking, some noticeable alterations have been made, as Table 19.1 on page 328 illustrates.

One implication of such a list is the importance of focusing on both the forms of language and the functions of language. In teaching oral communication, we don't limit students' attention to the whole picture, even though that whole picture is important. We also help students to see the pieces—right down to the small parts—of language that make up the whole. Just as you would instruct a novice artist in composition, the effect of color hues, shading, and brush stroke techniques, so language students need to be shown the details of how to convey and negotiate the ever-elusive meanings of language.

TYPES OF CLASSROOM SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

In Chapter 18, six types of listening performance were listed. With the obvious connection between listening and speaking, six similar categories apply to the kinds of oral production that students are expected to carry out in the classroom.

1. Imitative

A very limited portion of classroom speaking time may legitimately be spent generating "human tape recorder" speech, where, for example, learners practice an intonation contour or try to pinpoint a certain vowel sound. Imitation of this kind is carried out not for the purpose of meaningful interaction, but for focusing on some particular element of language form.

New teachers in the field always want the answer to this question: Is *drilling* a legitimate part of the communicative language classroom? The answer is a qualified yes. Drills offer students an opportunity to listen and to orally repeat certain strings of language that may pose some linguistic difficulty-either phonological or grammatical. Drills are to language teaching what the pitching machine is to baseball. They offer limited practice through repetition. They allow one to focus on one element of language in a controlled activity. They can help to establish certain psychomotor patterns (to "loosen the tongue") and to associate selected grammatical forms with their appropriate context. Here are some useful guidelines for successful drills:

- Keep them short (a few minutes of a class hour only).
- Keep them simple (preferably just one point at a time).
- Keep them "snappy."
- Make sure students know why they are doing the drill.
- Limit them to phonology or grammar points.
- Make sure they ultimately lead to communicative goals.
- Don't overuse them.

Table 19.1. Micro- and macroskills of oral communication

Microskills

1. Produce chunks of language of different lengths.
2. Orally produce differences among the English phonemes and allophonic variants.
3. Produce English stress patterns, words in stressed and unstressed positions, rhythmic structure, and intonational contours.
4. Produce reduced forms of words and phrases.
5. Use an adequate number of lexical units (words) in order to accomplish pragmatic purposes.
6. Produce fluent speech at different rates of delivery.
7. Monitor your own oral production and use various strategic devices—pauses, fillers, self-corrections, backtracking-to enhance the clarity of the message.
8. Use grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), word order, patterns, rules, and elliptical forms.
9. Produce speech in natural constituents-in appropriate phrases, pause groups, breath groups, and sentences.
10. Express a particular meaning in different grammatical forms.

Macroskills

11. Use cohesive devices in spoken discourse.
12. Accomplish appropriately communicative functions according to situations, participants, and goals.
13. Use appropriate registers, implicature, pragmatic conventions, and other sociolinguistic features in face-to-face conversations.
14. Convey links and connections between events and communicate such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.
15. Use facial features, kinesics, body language, and other nonverbal cues along with verbal language to convey meanings.
16. Develop and use a battery of speaking strategies, such as emphasizing key words, rephrasing, providing a context for interpreting the meaning of words, appealing for help, and accurately assessing how well your interlocutor is understanding you.

2. Intensive

Intensive speaking goes one step beyond imitative to include any speaking performance that is designed to practice some phonological or grammatical aspect of language. Intensive speaking can be self-initiated, or it can even form part of some pair work activity, where learners are “going over” certain forms of language.

3. Responsive

A good deal of student speech in the classroom is responsive: short replies to teacher- or student-initiated questions or comments. These replies are usually sufficient and do not extend into dialogues (#4 and #5). Such speech can be meaningful and authentic:

T: How are you today?
S: Pretty good, thanks, and you?

T: What is the main idea in this essay?
S: The United Nations should have more authority.

Sl: So, what did you write for question number one?
S2: Well, I wasn't sure, so I left it blank.

4. Transactional (dialogue)

Transactional language, carried out for the purpose of conveying or exchanging specific information, is an extended form of responsive language. Conversations, for example, may have more of a negotiative nature to them than does responsive speech:

T: What is the main idea in this essay?
S: The United Nations should have more authority.
T: More authority than what?
S: Than it does right now.
T: What do you mean?
S: Well, for example, the UN should have the power to force certain countries to destroy its nuclear weapons.
T: You don't think the UN has that power now?
S: Obviously not. Several countries are currently manufacturing nuclear bombs.

Such conversations could readily be part of group work activity as well.

5. Interpersonal (dialogue)

The other form of conversation mentioned in the previous chapter was interpersonal dialogue, carried out more for the purpose of maintaining social relationships than for the transmission of facts and information. These conversations are a little trickier for learners because they can involve some or all of the following factors:

- a casual register
- colloquial language
- emotionally charged language
- slang
- ellipsis
- sarcasm
- a covert "agenda"

For example:

Amy: Hi, Bob, how's it going?
Bob: Oh, so-so.
Amy: Not a great weekend, huh?
Bob: Well, far be it from me to criticize, but I'm pretty miffed about last week.
Amy: What are you talking about?
Bob: I think you know perfectly well what I'm talking about.
Amy: Oh, that ... How come you get so bent out of shape over something like that?
Bob: Well, whose fault was it, huh?
Amy: Oh, wow, this is great. Wonderful. Back to square one. For crying out loud Bob, I thought we'd settled this before. Well, what more can I say?

Learners would need to learn how such features as the relationship between interlocutors, casual style, and sarcasm are coded linguistically in this conversation.

6. Extensive (monologue)

Finally, students at intermediate to advanced levels are called on to give extended monologues in the form of oral reports, summaries, or perhaps short speeches. Here the register is more formal and deliberative. These monologues can be planned or impromptu.

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