

Spoken Grammar : Offering EFL Students True Communicative Competence

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Abstract

In the realm of TEFL, it is now accepted that spoken English has a grammar that is unique and differentiated from that of written English. However, closer observation shows how the spoken English presented in today's classrooms is still rooted in the grammar of the written language. Utilizing analytical models of spoken discourse, this paper exposes how many student-centered pedagogy that claim to promote communicative competence are not only insufficient, but in some ways adverse to students' development of communicative skills for outside of the classroom. This paper will also comment on approaches that lend towards a more natural spoken output for EFL students.

1. Introduction

In the past three decades, the focus in TEFL has concentrated on developing better communicative skills, often with the ultimate goal of developing natural spoken output in language learners. Traditions in aspiring for 'standard English' skills, long associated as representing 'educated English' (Ruhlemann, 2008), have served as the means for fostering both written and spoken skills in a teacher-centered classroom. Although the variations between written 'standard English' and actual spoken English have long been recognized, the spoken forms are typically seen as 'corruptions' of the rules of 'grammar' (McCarthy and Carter, 1995 : 1), lacking identifiable patterns, and as such are typically ignored in the classroom. However, with the continuing development of spoken discourse analysis and research into large corpora of speech, it is now quite obvious that spoken English has discernable, analyzable patterns, and is far removed from the kind of written discourse seen as representing 'standard English'. It is now accepted that spoken English discourse has its own grammar, specific registers, and variations. These are separate from the more 'traditional' grammars that are now only practically relevant to varieties of the written language.

Nowadays, many teachers aim to develop their learners' communicative competence by using a student-centered pedagogy. However, much current pedagogy may not only be inadequate, but actually detrimental to students' progress in developing practical communicative skills for use in conversation outside of the classroom. Applying analytical models of spoken discourse, there is evidence that the ways in which spoken English is often presented in the classroom overlooks skills essential for true com-

municative competence. Furthermore, the forms of spoken English proposed in textbooks and practiced in the classroom still appear to be rooted in ‘models that owe their origin and shape to the written language’ (Carter and McCarthy cited in Hinkel and Fotos, 2002 : 51 ; see also Carter, 1998 : 43 ; Rühlemann, 2008 : 683).

In this paper, I will critically review core analytical models of spoken discourse and identify specific discrepancies between traditional classroom discourse and ‘natural spoken output’. I will also highlight how the forms and functions in conversation differ from those of the ‘standard English’ predominantly used as the medium of speech in today’s language classrooms. Basing my argument on these comparative analyses, I will then address some important pedagogical concerns that are often unintentionally neglected in fostering natural spoken output.

2. What is Spoken Discourse Analysis ?

There are varied interpretations of what discourse entails depending on the discipline. For the purposes of this exploration, we shall recognize discourse analysis as concerned with language above the sentence level and beyond the bounds of (traditional) grammar. It pertains to the use of language and its social functions, while at the same time considering ‘the relationships between language and the contexts in which it is used’ (McCarthy, 1991 : 5).

Obviously, spoken and written forms of discourse exhibit differing qualities. My paper’s underlying argument is that the spoken forms modeled in the classroom are representative of the ‘standard English’ which is equated with the grammar of written discourse. Rühlemann reports that ‘standard English has been the major model in EFL for both writing and speech’ (2008 : 675). However, as of 1999, it was actually only spoken anymore as ‘a minority variety’ by 12-15% of Britons, ‘suggesting that standard English is not a *spoken* variety at all’ (Rühlemann, 2008 : 674) and is now considered ‘primarily a written variety’ (Bex, 1999 : 131). A number of unique speech qualities can be identified when comparing written and spoken discourse. Conversation in particular is generally more spontaneous, is arguably more complex in its turn-taking patterns, and features more shortened, non-verbal, and vague language forms. Additionally, although not exclusively, conversation is more dependent on context and the relationship of the participants engaged in the discourse.

When attempting to analyze speech, a number of models can be used to look at spoken discourse in its varied forms and functions. Linguistic models are interested in identifying units of discourse and look at the patterns and functions that these units realize within spoken interaction. Theoretical models focus more on what language *does* and ‘how the occurrence of a linguistic item affects the non-linguistic world’ (Brazil et al., 2009 : 1). We will move on to examine six of these core analytical models and explore what each tells us about spoken discourse.

3.1 Classroom Discourse Analysis — A Starting Point

Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) provide one of the earliest linguistic models for analyzing spoken discourse, with a system originally designed for looking at the function of classroom language at the time.

Their model was based upon Halliday's (1961) 'rank scale', which was developed to distinguish the grammatical 'form' of a sentence's components and the relationships of those components. Using a similar system, Sinclair and Coulthard's model aims to analyze the larger picture of discourse, concerned with the *meaning* of classroom speech.

Sinclair and Coulthard's model helps us understand some central characteristics of spoken discourse in a teacher-centered classroom. One observation is that boundary and teaching exchanges make up two main types of classroom exchanges. Boundary exchanges differ from teaching exchanges in that they consist of a framing or focus move which functions to mark a shift in the stage of a lesson. Another key observation is that teaching exchanges take the form of either eliciting, informing, or directing and consist of the moves of initiation (I), response (R), or follow-up (F). These three-part IRF teaching exchanges are interesting in that extended analysis of teacher-centered classroom discourse (Coulthard, 1985 : 123-129) shows that it is almost always the teacher who makes the initiation (I). This may or may not be followed by a student response (R), which consequently may or may not conclude with a teacher follow-up (F) as evaluation of the student's response. This interaction provides a typical teaching exchange structure of I(R) (F). Sinclair and Coulthard identify 11 subcategories of these classroom exchanges (Coulthard, 1992 : 25-31). Exchange structure analysis exposes that the teacher receives more speaking moves compared to students and as such commands greater control of teacher-centered classroom discourse.

The analysis of Sinclair and Coulthard's classroom acts (Coulthard, 1985 : 126) illustrates the restricted speech environment of the traditional classroom. Acts are divisible into three categories : *meta-interactive* for organizing the overall 'flow' of information, *interactive* for helping to deliver information relating to lesson goals, and *turn-taking* in controlling the process of classroom discourse. Instances of meta-interactive and turn-taking acts are much less common in everyday spoken discourse. Although many of the interactive acts are found outside of the classroom, their use is generally regulated by the 'social institution of a classroom' (Young cited in Seedhouse, 2004 : xii).

Sinclair and Coulthard used their model to observe general classroom spoken discourse that was at the time representative of the teacher-centered classroom. Despite this contextual limitation of its application, this model is critical in that it served as an initial 'stepping-stone' for a revolutionary new way of looking at discourse. In its later expansions and analytical application to conversation, this model also offers insight into the stark differences of form and function between traditional classroom discourse and natural speech.

3.2 Conversation Discourse Analysis — IRF Beyond the Classroom

Over the years Sinclair and Coulthard's original model was expanded by others for adaption to a larger array of discourse. Francis and Hunston (1987) proposed an updated model which specifically aimed at analyzing conversation in similar terms and units. However, certain elements of the original Sinclair and Coulthard model that were not applicable to conversation were removed, while other sections were expanded. It is essential to note that the follow-up and focus moves, and their functions of boundary exchange and evaluation of student contributions in classroom discourse, are absent in the con-

versational model. In their place, Francis and Hunston add eliciting, informing, acknowledging, directing, and behaving moves for use in conversation. Likewise, the conversation model utilizes an additional 22 acts not present in classroom discourse. Furthermore, half of the acts used in the classroom model are absent in this model, as they have no applicable function in conversation.

Using the Francis and Hunston model to compare conversation structure to the common I(R) (F) structure of classroom teaching exchanges reveals that conversation exchanges exhibit a much more complex structure: I(R/I)R(Fⁿ) (Coulthard, 1992). This structure allows for exponential variation when factoring in the additional acts, moves, and exchanges present in conversation. Not to mention that any participant in a conversation, unlike in traditional classroom discourse, may initiate, respond, or follow-up. One example is in how elicitation in the classroom takes the form of an act in an opening move of an initiation teaching exchange, which is almost always relegated to the teacher. In conversation, however, elicitation may be realized by one of six acts in the eliciting move of an initiation exchange, and by any of the participants in the conversation. This is but one example of how the application of linguistic analytical models illustrate the great variety of forms and functions present between conversation and traditional classroom discourse.

3.3 Spoken Grammar — Conversational Features Based on Corpora

McCarthy and Carter (1995), in their corpus analysis of actual conversations, take up the argument over the differences of written and spoken discourse, and call for recognition of an altogether separate grammar for speech. They assert that ‘language pedagogy that claims to support the teaching and learning of speaking skills does itself a disservice if it ignores what we know about the spoken language’ (McCarthy and Carter in Hinkel and Fotos, 2002 : 51). Spoken grammar identifies a number of specific language features that are either much more pervasive in, or exclusive to, spoken discourse. Examples include subject and verb ellipses, subordination, tails, reporting verbs, tags, the use of *tend to*, and of *will/be going to* (McCarthy and Carter, 1995 : 208-214).

Using a traditional IRF analysis, McCarthy and Carter look at a small-group classroom discussion between a teacher and four students, and compare the features to natural spoken discourse (McCarthy and Carter, 1997 : 121-127). Their analysis does reveal students speaking casually, making use of ellipses, some informal and vague language, with more resemblance to conversational discourse. However, application of Sinclair and Coulthard’s model also recognizes that many of the discourse features of a traditional teacher-dominated IRF interaction still persist. McCarthy and Carter warn of ignoring what corpus research tells us of the more interactive and interpersonal aspects of spoken discourse. They point out that continued use of classroom IRF models and speech based on written forms threatens to produce ‘speakers of English who can only speak like a book’ (1995 : 207). Other important insights about factors that constrain the production of spoken discourse also come from speech act theory, which we briefly look at next.

3.4 Speech Act Theory — What Language Does

Speech act theory as first proposed by Austin (1962) and Searle (1965) brings up a number of useful concepts that support the argument we are developing in favor of a spoken grammar. Speech act theory shifts away from the linguistic focus we have looked at so far, and observes what language *does* as opposed to what it *means*. Central to speech acts are the requirement that any spoken discourse is reliant on the cooperation of the speaker and listener. Grice identifies features of this co-operative principle in his conversational maxims that define the responsibilities each party holds in contributing towards a successful interaction (Coulthard, 1985 : 31). One common pitfall for language learners in not being exposed to real-world spoken discourse is failing to fulfill some of these conversational duties. Of particular concern is being able to correctly interpret, and provide relevant response to, the *meaning* of what is said in language.

Concepts such as illocutionary and perlocutionary forces are common features of spoken language that are vital for language learners to understand. If they are to be successful in L2 communication, they need awareness of, and have experience in, the function of language elements such as promises, insults, humor, advice, and directives. Coulthard reports that Austin identifies conditions which must be met in order for performatives to succeed (1985 : 14), requiring all parties of the discourse to correctly interpret *what is being done* by *what is said* (or not said). To complicate matters, Brazil et al. point out that as ‘one utterance constrains the next utterance, any following utterance might be a response to what has been told, to its illocutionary force, or its perlocutionary effect’ (2009 : 8). Both intended illocutionary force and interpreted perlocutionary force are dependent on the speaker’s awareness of the difference between the forms and functions of such language.

As speech act theory requires the participants’ cooperation for a successful conversation, speakers expect that the listener is correctly interpreting what they are saying according to the context of the conversation. Grice’s conversational maxims call for each participant’s contribution to be only as informative as necessary for the listener to understand (Coulthard, 1985 : 31). In the language classroom, teachers frequently confirm student comprehension and provide detailed explanation when necessary, as ‘teaching’ is the function of much classroom discourse. However, such confirmations and explanations are not common in conversation, where listeners are expected to be correctly interpreting and responding in ‘real time’, sustaining the continuous flow of the conversation. Participants in conversation have the conversational responsibility to verify that which they do not understand. However, when actually faced with this dilemma in natural conversation, it seems that a common strategy for language learners is to ‘let it pass in the hope that not understanding wouldn’t matter or that the relevance would become apparent later’ (Brazil et al., 2009 : 19).

3.5 The Ethnography of Speaking — Speech Communities and Appropriacy

Rather than general principles of communication, the ethnographic approach to discourse is most concerned with sociolinguistic ‘rules of speaking’ that are understood in terms of the linguistic varieties that speakers have available to them in speech communities. According to Hymes (1971), we can iden-

tify differing types of discourse by identifying various speech communities and the range of varieties within them. Theoretically, with this information we can then determine what knowledge of grammar and appropriacy is needed for ‘communicative competence’ within a given community. In reality, arriving at a defining set of registers within a given speech community is unrealistic as ‘speakers do not fall neatly into categories’ (Coulthard, 1985 : 37). In fact, Coulthard states that speech communities are but ‘an idealization’, although he admits that, in making generalizations about language use, they are ‘a very useful and powerful concept’ (1985 : 37).

Hymes provides a number of parameters that he deems as useful in determining variation in the speech events of such speech communities (Coulthard, 1985 : 44-55). These parameters are helpful for further differentiating classroom and conversational discourse as they identify major inconsistencies. Classroom discourse is marked in that it occurs within the limited time frame of the lesson, possibly with other lessons before and after, and held within the boundaries of the room itself. The speech community of the classroom consists of a teacher and students ; however, teachers are the dominant participant. As such, they generally speak in a *speaker* role, acting as the ‘mouthpiece of the lesson’, and do not usually speak for themselves and their own interests as an *addressor*. Similarly, students are relegated to the *addressee* role when being addressed as a group. Even when nominated to answer or speak in pair or group activities, they still only fulfill a *speaker* role, merely conveying the language elicited in the discourse of the lesson. Additionally, teachers in their dominant classroom role control the topic and content of lesson discourse, which are generally determined by the language goals of the lesson. This is all done in an environment where student responses are under continuous evaluation by the teacher, adding to a stressful event that Hymes identifies as a ‘Face Threatening Act’ (Coulthard, 1985 : 50).

In consideration of the appropriacy of language use, certainly the EFL classroom is a unique speech community wherein the ‘rules of speaking’ vary greatly from other communities that students are likely to interact with. Noticeably absent is much of the ‘small talk’ of typical conversation, whose purpose is to maintain social relationships, a function usually unnecessary in the ‘social institution’ of the classroom. The classroom many times represents the only speech community in which students are exposed to the foreign language. Spoken discourse analysis exposes natural conversation as quite different from classroom speech, with topics changing frequently as per the negotiations of discourse by participants on equal grounds. How are language learners to develop communicative competence for use in speech communities outside of the class when their restricted experience fails to provide them with many of the communicative skills they need to do so ?

3.6 Ethnomethodology — Turn-Taking in Conversation

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) provide another core sociological view of speech that focuses on the patterns of turn-taking utilized in conversation. Once again our attention will focus on the differences between classroom and conversational discourse, emphasizing the everyday conversational variations absent in classroom speech. Within conversational turn-taking, turn allocation of speakers of equal ground proves a very complex, interactive, and cooperative process. It also exhibits a variety of identifiable ‘units’ that signal when an opening for the other participant(s) to speak has come. Indeed,

the required precision of speakers to maintain the natural flow of turn-taking in conversation is no simple matter. Coulthard points out that ‘the ability to come in as soon as a speaker has reached a possible completion requires a high degree of skill on part of the participants’ (1985 : 62). Among native speakers, this sense is developed intuitively. However, as standards for turn-taking and communication may vary across cultures, it can pose a much greater challenge for language learners. Yet, as we have already seen, turn-taking in language classroom discourse is traditionally determined by the dominant status of the teacher. Turn-taking is realized in teacher elicitation and nomination, as well as by the regulative structure of the lesson, again setting a stage where students are not experiencing essential communicative skills.

Beyond turn-taking and the ‘framework’ of conversation, ethnomethodology also attends to the issue of topic within conversation. The choice of topic in conversation is often limited by its ‘newsworthiness’ to the participants, as ‘someone who consistently produces talk which is not newsworthy is regarded as a bore’ (Coulthard, 1985 : 79). Topic within conversation also naturally flows from one topic to another. As such, conversational strategies for maintaining or introducing a new topic are also of great necessity for language learners aiming for natural spoken skills, skills again, which are not typically fostered in the classroom.

4. Considerations for Better Developing Natural Speech

Having identified central differences between spoken classroom and conversational discourse, we can now discuss in an informed manner what ways language classrooms are deficient in providing accurate models and practice of the spoken language. Each of these analytical models provides their own unique insights into differing aspects of spoken language. Perhaps an ideal approach in applying this knowledge is one that integrates the key points of each model, similar to the more recent proposals of Seedhouse (2004) and Hill (2007). I will continue by addressing some issues in how to provide more functional examples and conversational practice for the language learner within the social institution of the classroom.

Perhaps a good place to start would be with the outdated models of spoken discourse that are still used in classrooms, which serve as the standard to which language learners are aspiring to. Corpus research has shown that ‘little of this knowledge (of conversation) has trickled down to the EFL classroom’ (Rühlemann, 2008 : 672) and that ‘there are features of spoken grammar which are totally neglected in ELT materials’ (Timmis, 2005 : 118). It would seem that using conversational examples direct from corpora would be an ideal solution, as corpora would provide the ‘purest’ examples of speech in real life. However, even a leading researcher who has long endorsed a spoken grammar admits that this is a delicate issue. Carter (1998) identifies problems that could come about from using a culturally-weighted corpora based on exclusively native-speaker language, as well as concerns over the teachability of real spoken data. Despite the ongoing debate of *how* in fact data from corpora should be incorporated into teaching, the question of *whether* it should be is less of an issue. The stakes are clear when considering the plethora of challenges that await language learners in real-world conversation as illustrated in our analysis of spoken discourse. Carter echoes this appeal for a spoken grammar in that not doing so

would be to ‘deprive the learner of pedagogic, linguistic, and cultural choice’ (Carter, 1998 : 51).

Presenting target language should ideally be done with examples of real spoken discourse, initially presented as an audio recording. Through listening, spoken features such as inflections, stresses, pauses, and interruptions are much easier to recognize compared to a written transcription. Timmis also supports listening first to ‘ensure that texts are processed for meaning before they are analyzed for language’ (2005 : 119). A step up from audio recordings would be authentic video of actual conversational interactions. Video would allow students to also see the mannerisms of the speakers, gestures, eye movements, and other non-verbal signals that are all essential in conversation. Additionally, video would offer a more visual representation of the sociocultural context of the conversation to be brought into play. This would allow students to reach further conclusions about the relationship of the speakers as well as make assumptions about their character, background, age, social status, and the like. All of these cues are important in helping students become more aware of how spoken grammar is reliant on interpersonal relationships. Timmis suggests selecting materials that are interesting and represent believable interactions, yet warns against materials ‘too dense in unknown lexis or obscure cultural references’ (2005 : 118-119).

In addressing speech in the classroom, it would seem desirable to always maintain students’ awareness of the language in terms of sociocultural context and appropriacy. This should be done comprehensively with a constant consideration of form and function of the language. Hill voices his support of sociocultural context in the classroom as playing a ‘fundamental role in the use, as well as emergence and submergence, of grammatical forms’ (2007 : 6). Of particular conversational benefit to students would be specifically introducing some of the more unique grammatical forms present in spoken language such as ellipses, subordination, vague language, tags, and tails. McCarthy and Carter propose their ‘Three Is’ method of (i) *illustrating* the language with real data, (ii) *interacting* in discussion and activities aimed at raising awareness of the language’s interpersonal uses, and in (iii) *induction* : having students make their own deductions of language functions (1995 : 217). Timmis suggests approaching this type of language in a number of steps : an initial audio presentation followed up with cultural access tasks, global understanding tasks, noticing, and language discussion tasks (2005 : 118-121).

Regardless of the methodology used to introduce real data into the classroom, some researchers still voice concerns in the practicality of doing so. Rühlemann (2008 : 684) voices concerns in terms of costs, technological requirements, as well as the proficiency of the teacher and students in navigating corpus data. Despite the challenges, in using real data and examples, we uncover a greater variety of spoken discourse and expose students to an opportunity to expand their understanding and communicative competence with the choice of spoken grammar.

Attending to actual classroom discourse, our earlier critical review of McCarthy and Carter, as well as Willis, reveals that the teacher-centered I(R) (F) model still apparent in today’s classrooms is not representative of the more complex I(R/I) R(Fⁿ) structures in actual conversation. As such, it would seem obvious to strive to provide chances for students to engage in more realistic conversation exchanges, with opportunities to initiate, respond, and follow-up. Students should also have access to controlling organizational exchanges when possible, and there should be more focus on developing interactions between inner and outer language. Students should be given more opportunities to practice in an ad-

dressor rather than a speaker role, as this allows them to negotiate topics and develop fluid turn-taking skills. Additionally teachers should allow chances for students to practice more phatic language skills, such as small talk. Koester voices the learner's need of 'exposure to and opportunity to practice the discourse patterns of different types of conversation' (2002 : 178). As this paper has illustrated, there is great variation in spoken discourse outside of the classroom, making assorted communicative demands on the language learner. As such, it is essential that we provide students with as much varied discourse practice as possible, to prepare them for the communicative challenges that await them outside the classroom.

Research by Willis reveals that the teacher uses I(R) (F) patterns in the outer level structural language, using moves of up to six acts. However, typical student pair or group work in the inner level practice of L2 typically only involves I and R exchanges, usually realized in only one act (Willis, 1987, cited in Coulthard, 1992 : 177). Willis states that with language like this produced for evaluation, practice in the inner level consists of 'utterances bearing little or no resemblance to possible sequences in normal discourse' and 'devoid of their normal communicative value' (Willis in Coulthard, 1992 : 163). However, 'replication' activities much more closely resemble real-world discourse, in that students must use the language communicatively to solve problems, maneuvering their way through conversation, and without restrictions on the forms that they may use. In such activities, Willis identifies students handling I (R) (F) exchanges (Willis in Coulthard : 1992 : 180) and turn-taking without teacher intervention as taking the shape of 'free' independent inner classroom language, and as much more resembling the shape of actual conversation. Replication-type activities seem an ideal alternative for classroom language practice, as they are quite flexible in adapting to an array of language forms in communicatively demanding scenarios representative of real-world discourse.

5. Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to bring light to the need for a spoken grammar divorced from the archaic models of written grammar still used in spoken English. We have seen that assembling a comprehensive set of rules as well as deciding on a practical system of integration from the traditional understandings of grammar remains a matter of debate. Research of spoken corpora shows that those aiming for the lofty and elusive goal of 'natural spoken output' have much to reconsider in their understanding of spoken discourse. In identifying the communicative needs and abilities of our students, we need to help them realize *how* things are *said* and *meant* in spoken English. We must strive to offer classroom activities that better represent real-world interactions, and promote awareness of context, appropriateness, as well as relationships of form and function. Ultimately, we must offer what McCarthy and Carter have coined a 'choice of grammars' by fostering students' competence for the actual speaking situations they are likely to find themselves in.

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