Teaching speaking and listening

There are ‘tools’ that teachers can provide for learners that can enhance learners’ speaking and listening abilities. These include developing:

- learners’ confidence,
- their listening abilities for different contexts
- their understanding of spoken grammar and features of spoken language.

By developing learner awareness of these different elements the learners have a number of tools they can use for learning spoken language that can be applied to any context. The aim of this is to encourage learner independence which not only trains learners to function better during study, but also ensure that learners continue to acquire language skills outside the classroom or your lessons.

By developing learners’ listening abilities, a teacher is enabling learners to participate at an early stage in the communication exchanges that are happening in their community (Field, 2007, p.34).

1.1 Develop Learners’ Confidence

The importance of developing confidence in learners lies in the premise that in the early stages of language acquisition, the learner’s main objective is to establish meaning of the language at all cost. Often taking considerable effort, there is little time left to focus on the actual form of words used (Field, 2007, p.33).

To develop learner confidence in listening skills, learners can be encouraged to listen for different parts of the input and develop hypotheses about the speakers intended meaning (Field, 2007, p.34). This encourages learners to become familiar with not understanding every word of spoken or written input and to become more confident in extracting meaning from a partially understood text (Field, 2007, p.34).

The importance of Pre listening:

Decide on a topic of interest to your student. Develop pre-listening exercises using discussion questions or a mind-map to build up their vocabulary, activate their existing knowledge of the topic and provide them with the background needed to understand the text.

You could use discussion questions from http://www.esldiscussions.com/ (some topics on this site are controversial. Please only choose topics that are appropriate and with respect of your students needs).

If you were focussing on building up techniques for casual conversation you could focus on asking for clarification, topic changes or giving feedback in casual conversation.
The following is an example using clarification techniques:

**Pre listening**

Step 1: Ask your student if they know how we ask for clarification in casual conversation and when we use it. If they are unclear, provide the following examples (or others you can think of) and explain how and when they are used in casual conversation. Develop a natural text that uses these techniques for seeking clarification so they can see them in use.

Examples of clarification techniques:

Sorry, what was that?
Pardon?
What?
Would you mind repeating that?
I didn’t get you, what did you say?
Sorry, I don’t understand.

**Listening:**

Step 2: Play a tape or cd or read a passage to your student. Ask them to listen just for the gist of the text, rather than exact meaning of every word.

Ask your student questions about what they heard, what kind of text it was (i.e a conversation, information, a speech), what was the function (to persuade, inform), what kind of tone was it (happy, sad, excited, angry, instructional etc). How did they know? What else did they recognise about the passage?

Step 3: Play the text again and ask your student to identify how clarification was sought in the text.

Give your student a list of different forms of asking for clarification. Play the text again and ask them to tick which ones they hear in the passage.

Step 4: Provide your student with information gap activity where you write down the different forms of clarification which are used in the text with some words missing. Play the text again and ask them to listen for the missing words.
Post listening
You could then practice asking for clarification with your student afterwards.

Step 5: Begin a basic conversation with your student, mumble some sentences so that they can’t understand you and have to practice asking for clarification. You could also cover pronunciation and stress in this activity.

Other useful listening activities to raise learners’ awareness and provide them with useful strategies:

- **Awareness raising:** Provide your student with a set of pictures that match a story, allow them time to look at the pictures to get an idea of what is happening in the pictures. Read the story aloud to your student and ask them to put the pictures in order as they hear the story (You would need to conduct pre-listening activities prior to doing this so that your student had accessed the correct vocabulary and was prepared).

- **With recorded speech,** many texts are not as authentic as natural conversations that happen between people. If you have a recorder, try recording yourself chatting to a friend or family member in as natural a way as possible.

- **The register of the speech** – the situation and context in which it occurs impacts greatly on the language used, the tenor or relationship between speakers, the degree of formality and the mode i.e. whether it is face-to-face, over the telephone, pre-recorded etc. These elements are important for your student to be able to identify so that they know what language choices are appropriate. You could do this in listening exercises when listening for gist – ask your student about the register of the text (who is speaking, what’s their relationship, how are they speaking and what are they speaking about). And ask your student to identify what this tells them about the kind of language that might be used. How formal/informal can they expect the text to be, how much jargon may be used (Thornbury, 2008, p. 19).

- **Prediction activity:** Predicting, asking for clarification and using non-verbal cues are strategies that can increase chances for successful listening. For example, using video can help learners develop cognitive strategies. As they view a segment with the sound off, learners can be asked to make predictions about what is happening by answering questions about setting, action and interaction. Viewing the segment again with the sound on allows them to confirm or modify their hypothesis.
1.2 Develop Understanding of the Grammar and Structure of Spoken English

To effectively improve learners speaking it is important to look at the structure and grammar of spoken interactions (Burns and Joyce, 1999, p.92). Grammar teaching for speaking purposes has largely focussed around structured sentence grammar. This however, is of limited use to learners as spontaneous speech is produced in clause length, rather then sentence length, segments (Thornbury, 2008, p. 33). Learners need to be aware of what real conversation looks like and how the grammar and features of spoken language differ from written language (Harmer, 2007, p. 344).

A text in written form:

Yesterday was a nice sunny day so I went to Bondi beach with my friend Penny. I left home at about 12pm and picked up Penny on the way. There was quite a lot of traffic getting to the beach so we didn’t get there until about 1pm. Once we got there we were very lucky to find a parking spot. We had a lot of fun at the beach swimming and walking along the sand. For lunch we had fish and chips in the park which was really nice. I look forward to going to the beach again next weekend if it is hot.

The same content in spoken form

Jessica: Hi Pete how you going?
Pete: Yeah I’m good Jess, and you?
Jessica: Yeah really good thanks. Wasn’t it beautiful yesterday, I had such a good time at Bondi with Penny.
Pete: Oh yeah, what time were you there?
Jessica: Oh about 1pm, heaps of traffic on the way though,
Pete: Oh really …
Jessica: Yeah but luckily we found a park pretty easily.
Pete: Did you have a nice swim?
Jessica: Yeah beautiful swim…. we had a nice walk too and great fish and chips in the park
Pete: Wow, what a day! I bet the water was warm
Jessica: Actually it was a bit chilly, not like last weekend.
Pete: Really…
Jessica: Yeah but it was still nice, can’t wait to go down again next weekend ….. you should come.
Pete: Yeah, sure will. Let’s talk on Friday and we’ll see what the weather is doing.
Jessica: Ok great, I’ll call you Friday. Bye Pete
Pete: Bye
Difference between Pragmatically Motivated Interactions and Interpersonally Motivated Interactions

The uses of spoken language provide a basis to differentiate for learners the difference between **pragmatically motivated interactions** or ‘encounters’ and **interpersonally motivated interactions** or ‘conversations’ (Burns and Joyce, 1999, p.92). These can be further characterised into interactive and non-interactive events and whether the speaking is planned or unplanned (Harmer, 2007, p. 343). This enables the teacher to highlight the spoken language for different social interactions and how the structure and grammar used in different interactions differs (Burns and Joyce, 1999, p.92).

Encounters have generally been the focus of teaching spoken language as the structured nature of these interactions is more predictable than conversation and can often be taught as formulated genres or text types.

**Pragmatically motivated interactions (Encounters)**

Purchasing a train ticket

Making a doctors appointment

Making a speech

**Interpersonally motivated interactions (Conversations)**

Chatting with a friend/neighbour

A telephone conversation (planned or unplanned)

As well as learning about structured encounters, participation in casual conversation is an equally important need expressed by many learners to be able to function effectively as new residents in Australia. As Burns and Joyce (1999, p.96) highlight “understanding the overall structure of conversation is essential if students are to participate effectively in casual conversation”.

**Discourse Markers**

Discourse markers are used to buy time, to start a turn, or to mark the beginning or end of a segment through the use of grammar and vocabulary (Thornbury, 2008, p. 15, 33). Harmer (2007, p.343) and Thornbury (2008, p.15) highlight the dependence of learners successful execution of turn taking, through the correct use of discourse markers, for successful spoken interaction.
Typical discourse markers for managing turn-taking in conversation include:

That reminds me…
By the way…
Well anyway …
Like I say …
Yes, but …
Yes I know …

Grammatical Differences: Ellipses and Others

When speaking is in a shared context there is often less need to be as explicit as you would be in written language and it is therefore elliptic in nature (Thornbury, 2008, p. 12). Ellipses are a frequent characteristic of spoken language whereby words, phrases or whole clauses are left out because they become redundant (Thornbury, 2008, p.12).

From the example above, in natural speech the conversation would be:

Jessica: Hi Pete how you going?
Pete: Yeah I’m good Jess, and you?

Instead of:

Jessica: Hi Pete how (are) you going?
Pete: Yeah I’m good Jess, and (how are) you?

There are also a number of other grammatical differences between spoken and written English that should come to the attention of learners. These are the use of question tags, vague words, performance effects and direct speech (Thornbury, 2008, p.20 and Luoma, 2004, p.17).

Question tags: are extremely common in spoken language, comprising a quarter of all questions (Thornbury, 2008, p.20) but almost non-existent in written language. Question tags are when we put a question on the end of a sentence. For example: Yeah I’m good Jess, and you? This is really nice, isn’t it? Or using right? no? or ok? At the end of sentences.

Vague words: it’s sort of cold, or warmish, or I kind of need to talk to you about that. Vague words are used not only to fill pauses, but also to reduce the assertiveness of statements.

Performance effects: These include the use of hesitations (erm, uh), repeats, false starts and incomplete utterances.
Language Chunks

Words combine to form what are referred to as language chunks, fixed phrases or lexical phrases which take on their own meaning and become part of memorised strings of speech that native speakers have at their disposal. For example, ‘by the way’, ‘catch you later’, ‘back in a sec’ etc (Harmer, 2007, pp. 37, 38 and Luoma, 2004, p.18). For learners to be able to understand and utilise such phrases, these should be taught to be used in the correct context as their own meaning units. A mental store of memorised chunks is essential if fluency is to be achieved (Thornbury, 2008, p. 36). This can be demonstrated with the following list of phrases based around the word ‘bet’ that take on individual meanings:

- I bet
- I’ll bet
- You bet
- Wanna bet?
- Don’t bet on it
- Your best bet (is … )
- My bet (is…)
- A safe bet
- You can bet your bottom dollar that …
- You can bet on the fact that …

Speech acts

Speech acts have communicative functions such as complementing, suggesting, requesting and offering that are part of a speaker’s pragmatic knowledge. That is, knowing how to do things with language taking into account the context of its use (Thornbury, 2008, p. 16). For learners, this will require an understanding of how to perform and interpret specific acts of speech as well knowing how to adapt these speech act formulas for different situations (Thornbury, 2008, p.16, 33). There are also set patterns within speech acts such as the adjacency pair which involves a question and a paired response (Harmer, 2007, p. 345 and Thornbury, 2008, p. 16). As these are paired utterances where the second is dependent on the first, they can be quite formulaic for teaching (Thornbury, 2008, p. 17).
Example activity

**Step 1:** Explain what Speech acts are and how/why we use them. The amount of pre-listening or pre-reading you will need to do here depends on the level of your student and their current knowledge of how we use speech acts (see Step 3).

**Step 2:** Script or improvise a conversation which involves a number of speech acts such as:

- A compliment
- A response to a compliment
- An invitation
- An acceptance
- A suggestion
- A request
- An apology + refusal + excuse
- A promise

Here is a conversation that follows this model:

**Al:** Hey, Barry, what a great tie!

**Barry:** Thanks. Actually I’ve had it for ages but I never wear it.

**Al:** It suits you. Listen, Barry, I was thinking, do you fancy lunch together some time this week?

**Barry:** That’s be nice, what about Friday?

**Al:** Perfect. Do you mind if I ask Jackie as well?

**Barry:** Well actually, I’m sorry Al, I’d rather you didn’t. It’s just that Jackie doesn’t know I’m back, and ….

**Al:** Oh, ok I understand. That’s fine, I won’t tell her, I promise.
Step 3: Go through the list of different speech acts and see how many of them they can recognise (depending on the level of your student. If they are low level then you may need to do some initial activities introducing speech acts). Focus on the speech acts they know and complete the exercises below and then go back and develop their understanding of how to develop the speech acts they don’t yet know.

Step 4: Write up a number of speech acts plus the response in a jumbled order and ask your student to match the speech act with the correct response. Then ask them to identify the words or formulaic expression that are the indicators of each speech act. For example:

What a + positive adjective + noun = a compliment

i.e. What a nice dress

what about + noun? = a suggestion

i.e. What about Friday?

Step 5: As a follow-up, ask your student to attempt to script, rehearse and perform their own dialogues using these formulas.

Activity adapted from Thornbury (2008, p. 52)

Pronunciation

Pronunciation, or the sound of speech, can refer to many features of speech such as pitch, volume, speed, pausing, stress and intonation (Luoma, 2004, p. 11). The sounds of people’s speech can be very meaningful as speakers use the above features to create a texture for their talk that supports and enhances what they are saying (Luoma, 2004, p. 10). When words are strung together in normal speech they are subject to phonological change where word boundaries become blurred, sounds can become modified by the sounds next to them, some sounds drop off and some sounds are added (Buck, 1995, p. 114). These can also be combined with other dimensions particular to speech, such as facial expressions and gestures, which can add depth to a message and may even convey the exact opposite to what the actual words would suggest (Buck, 1995, p.115). Learners then need to be made aware of the above features of speech when teaching speaking and listening as they will impact on learners understanding of speech or the meaning they convey in speech.

See HTS lesson on teaching pronunciation and your training notes on pronunciation.
Reference list


