

1 Speaking and the language learner

Speaking is accepted by everyone as an essential language-communication skill, but its importance to language learners goes beyond just day-to-day communication. Speaking can facilitate language acquisition and contribute towards the academic development of many second language learners. It is useful, therefore, to begin our discussion of teaching speaking by examining these benefits and, at the same time, to consider factors that can affect learners' willingness to speak more in the target language. We will do this by answering two questions in this chapter:

1. In what way is speaking important to learners' language acquisition and academic learning?
2. If speaking is important, why do some learners avoid it?

To answer these questions, we will be examining three topics:

- Speaking and language acquisition.
- Speaking and academic learning.
- Speaking and affective factors.

Introduction

All language teachers know that speaking is an important communication skill for their students, but not all are aware of how speaking can directly contribute to other important areas of their students' personal success. In this chapter, we will review some of the research and discussions that highlight the role of speaking in second language acquisition. We will also discuss the importance of speaking for academic learning, in view of the high number of second language learners in different areas of education. Finally, we will address a question that many teachers have: If speaking is important, and my students know it is important, why do some of them avoid speaking in the target language? One of the main reasons, we suggest, is that they are influenced by affective factors, such as anxiety and a lack of motivation. In this chapter, we aim to establish the importance of speaking in the language classroom not just as a communication skill, but also as a means of facilitating the acquisition of the target language and the learning

of academic content. We also aim to shed light on the challenges that some second language learners face. Throughout this chapter and the rest of the book, we will use the term “second language” as shorthand to refer to any language that individuals are learning in addition to their first or other dominant languages. While the contexts for learning may be different, we believe many processes and issues pertaining to speaking are common to all language learners.

Speaking and language acquisition

Like many teachers, you may hold the belief that language input is important in acquiring a new language. It may seem clear to you that reading extensively can help learners acquire a second language. You may also believe that listening is equally important in providing learners with the necessary input for learning. However, it is not just input through reading and listening that is important for language acquisition. Research studies have shown that output is also crucial in helping learners become increasingly proficient in the language. Your students’ development in the target language can be helped considerably by encouraging them to speak.

To explain the importance of speaking in your students’ language development, let’s begin by making a comparison between first and second language acquisition. Both processes share a number of common features of acquisition. One of these is the way in which the environment can influence successful language learning. Most people would not hesitate to say that for children to learn their first language, they must be “exposed” to the language. A difference of opinion, however, may arise with respect to the extent and the nature of such “exposure.” The view that is the most convincing for us is that the quality of conversations between adults and children play a crucial role in ensuring children’s success in learning to use the language effectively. This view, broadly referred to as the interactionist approach in language-acquisition literature, asserts that the language that children hear in the environment serves not just to “trigger” some innate mechanism for language acquisition. Rather, it is through daily interaction with expert speakers (i.e., adults or “caretakers”) that children receive valuable input and feedback on their emerging language, thus helping them to acquire the structure and use of the language. Assisted by adults who use conversational techniques when interacting with them, children develop an awareness of language form and its connection with language function (Halliday 1975).

Adults create opportunities for children to use the language to express intentions and interpret the meaning of utterances they hear. More importantly, through conversation strategies such as modeling, reformulation, contingent speech, clarification requests and confirmation checks (see Chapter 3), adults guide and encourage children to use language that is accurate, appropriate, and potentially rich and meaningful. In reformulation, for example, an adult may hear a child say, "I hurted my leg!" To show the child the correct form, the adult rephrases what is said, but, at the same time, makes sure the meaning that the child expresses is retained and the flow of the conversation is not disrupted by overt teaching. So the adult may say something like this, "Oh dear, you hurt your leg! Let me have a look." In reformulations, the child hears a complete and grammatical version of his or her original utterance, which may consist of only a word or two. Contingent speech is used to encourage children to continue talking about a topic that they themselves initiated. Below is an example of how a father creates opportunities for his three-year-old child to use language to express her ideas during pretend play:

CHILD: I going to the shop.

FATHER: You're going to the shops? What are you going to buy?

CHILD: Some more teabags.

FATHER: Who's going to have the teabags?

CHILD: Put in the tea.

FATHER: I think we've got lots of teabags. There are some more teabags in the cupboard.

CHILD: Orange. Some more orange.

(Goh & Silver 2006: 275.)

Besides showing his interest, the father's questions and comments are also an important means of setting up verbal scaffolds for increasing the number of turns the child gets. At the same time, the child knows that what she says has been understood. This type of positive feedback is very satisfying for language learners. When a child's speech is unclear, the adult may also request that he or she clarify the meaning. So, for example, when a child says, "I not got it," the adult may say, "What haven't you got?" thus prompting the child to make his or her meaning more explicit: "I not got the cake." Through a range of conversation strategies, adult speakers help children increase opportunities for using the language they are acquiring and, at the same time, help them notice problems in their speech and express their meaning more clearly.

Input, feedback, and output in second language learning

The types of conversation strategies just mentioned that are used in first language learning play a similarly important role in second language acquisition. When language learners are engaged in using oral language through interaction with expert speakers, they can also be prompted to notice their utterances and produce language that is increasingly more accurate. Early work on oral interaction by Hatch (1978) emphasized the important role that speaking plays in second language acquisition. Hatch, as well as other researchers who followed, argued strongly that by engaging in talk with more competent speakers, language learners will derive two key benefits. Firstly, they will be helped by their interlocutors' input and feedback. Besides hearing input that is modified for their language ability, when they interact with competent speakers, learners also have a chance to hear a more accurate model of language being used. Although comprehensible input is important, it alone is insufficient. Language learners can also develop their language by producing comprehensible output (Swain 1985). Swain's output hypothesis claims that the production of oral language can, under certain circumstances, enable learners to acquire new forms of the language. Language learners can be "pushed" to use language further when what they say is unclear or ungrammatical, and they have to repeat, rephrase, or correct what they have said in order to produce speech that is comprehensible to others. In responding to questions for clarification, learners and expert speakers engage in negotiations for meaning, where constant adjustments are made to the linguistic forms, structure of discourse, and content message so that an acceptable level of understanding is achieved (Long 1991). By engaging in negotiations for meaning with expert speakers, language learners can potentially increase their capacity to use the second language.

Clearly, besides language input, learners also need feedback in the form of questions, comments, repetitions, confirmation checks, requests for clarifications, and reformulations. These types of feedback are also important strategies in the process of negotiation for meaning. Reformulation, for example, has been shown to assist second language development (Mackey 1999), particularly among young second language learners (Mackey & Oliver 2002; Mackey & Silver 2005). An important benefit of negotiation for meaning is that learners have to actively produce spoken output, which is equally if not more important than language input in facilitating learning. Merely speaking the language, however, is inadequate for acquisition to occur. For example, when a group of learners talk among themselves, they may use the language inaccurately or inappropriately. Without appropriate feedback, they may not be aware that they are producing forms that are

inaccurate. Thus, even though they may become increasingly fluent, their language does not necessarily increase in accuracy.

According to Swain (1985), who articulated the Comprehensible-Output Hypothesis, language learners must notice language forms in their speech that are causing problems for the listeners, such as pronunciation or grammar, and try to modify their spoken language for greater accuracy. Swain argued that, “Negotiating meaning needs to incorporate the notion of being pushed towards the delivery of a message that is not only conveyed, but that is conveyed precisely, coherently, and appropriately” (Swain 1985: 248–249). When this process of negotiating meaning occurs regularly, it can lead learners to improve their control of language form, as well as meaning. When learners use language that is inaccurate and their meaning is imprecise, they should be asked to correct or rephrase what is said to make their meaning clearer. This will help them pay attention to the formal qualities of the language and lead them to use forms that are accurate in future communication. Swain (1995) summarizes three important benefits that negotiating meaning can have for second language learners. It:

- Helps learners become aware of target language forms that they have not acquired.
- Encourages learners to test their own knowledge of the language when modifying their original output.
- Provides learners with opportunities for developing their metalinguistic knowledge.

The importance of input–feedback–modified output in oral interaction with competent speakers has led to the articulation of various hypotheses about the role of such feedback in second language acquisition (Gass 1997; Long 1999). This research has important implications for the way speaking activities are planned in the classroom. Ideally, the activities should allow teachers to provide input and feedback to every language learner and to “push” each one to produce well-formed utterances. In reality, however, it is not possible for most teachers to do so because of physical constraints such as large class size. Even in small classes, as Lynch (1998) observes, some teachers may not be aware of the importance of modified output and, therefore, neglect opportunities for “nudging” learners to use language this way. This makes it all the more crucial for speaking lessons to include stages where learners can focus on the use of accurate language to accomplish speaking goals. Teachers could plan activities that draw their students’ attention to linguistic forms, discourse structure, and vocabulary that can further develop the learners’ ability to speak accurately. Explicit instruction

on language forms has been shown to contribute to learners' oral language development (Gor & Chernigovskaya 2005; Sheen 2005).

Discuss it

Think about two or three speaking activities that you have carried out or have observed in class. Briefly describe the activities to a colleague. To what extent were the students "pushed" to use accurate and appropriate language? What factors seem to facilitate this type of language production, and what factors work against it?

Speaking and academic learning

Traditionally, English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners consisted largely of university and college students, or adult immigrants learning in English-speaking countries. The age range of second language learners, however, has lowered over the years to include a sizeable number of young and adolescent non-native speakers studying in English-medium schools. In the U.S., for example, there is a high proportion of students in mainstream education who are learning English as a second language. Similar situations are found in the U.K., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In England, for example, provisional school census data in 2008 showed that an estimated 14 percent of primary pupils and 10 percent of secondary pupils in government-funded schools did not have English as their first language (Graf 2011). The situation of learners of English as a second or additional language participating in mainstream English-medium education has given rise to scholarly discussions about the role that teachers can play in supporting such learners (see, for example, Gibbons 2002; Graf 2011).

This ESL situation, however, is no longer limited to traditionally Anglophone countries. The pattern and contexts for learning and using English have been changing in other parts of the world. Asia is one such example. In Singapore, for example, where the medium of instruction in all schools is English, a large number of the children entering school have Chinese, Malay, or Tamil as their first language. To all intents and purposes, these children are ESL learners, and many teachers would readily endorse this view. Increasingly, the country has also become a favorite choice for all levels of education with students from neighboring Indonesia, the People's Republic of China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. The situation in Malaysia is somewhat different, but no less significant. There are now a large number of private colleges offering exchange programs (known in some countries