

Helping Intermediate Learners with Transactional Exchanges

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1. Introduction

I have decided to focus on helping intermediate learners to improve their speaking skills in transactional exchanges e.g. doing a job interview, opening a bank account. This is an area which I have become particularly interested in recently because many of my students are recent immigrants who require these skills. The expansion of the EU has seen new arrivals who need to engage in these transactional exchanges in order to organise their lives here. Until last year, the vast majority of adult learners in Ireland were short term learners who would be less interested in developing these skills.

2. Analysis

Students are often highly motivated to improve their speaking because they feel that it is the most important skill and that it lags behind their ability in other skills such as reading and their understanding of grammar rules. In addition, their previous study may have put more emphasis on reading and writing.

2.1 Definition of Transactional Exchanges

Whereas interactional language is language for maintaining social relationships, transactional language is message-oriented. “Transactional uses of language are those in which language is being used primarily for communicating information.” (Richards 1990, p54). Accurate and coherent communication of the message, confirmation that it has been understood, explicitness and directness of meaning are essential.

Transactional exchanges are interactions which have an outcome, for example, buying something in a shop, enrolling in a school. In such contexts the range of language used is relatively limited and therefore reasonably predictable.

2.2 Characteristics and Conventions of Transactional Exchanges

Speaking happens in real time and is often characterised by unfinished utterances, reformulation, overlapping utterances, grammatically incorrect utterances. Participants must follow cultural conventions which include factors such as gesture, body language and facial expression. Decisions have to be made about the direction of the exchange and how to deal with unexpected difficulties. Speech events differ from each other according to characteristics such as the degree of distance, formality, spontaneity and reciprocity. For example, a job interview would be characterised by distance, formality, some reciprocity and relatively little spontaneity. At the other extreme, meeting someone informally for the first time is reciprocal and spontaneous. However, even those events which seem spontaneous can in fact be predictably organised and do incorporate set phrases. So, greetings, introductions and conclusions follow predictable lines. Students at this level need be made aware of conventions of transactional exchanges and introduced to the particular language which they might expect to hear and use. In my teaching context, I have found that students appreciate learning set phrases which are particular to Ireland. For example, people often say “God bless” instead of “goodbye”.

2.3 Conversational Skills

Nolasco & Arthur (1987, p5) define the functions of conversation as

- a) to exchange information
- b) to create and maintain relationships
- c) to negotiate status and/or social role
- d) to decide on and carry out joint action

Broadly speaking, transactional conversations perform all of the above functions except b).

The specific aspects of conversation which Nolasco & Arthur identify are:

- 1) The Co-operative Principle: how much/little to say and how to say it
- 2) The Creation of Meaning: identifying meaning beyond words
- 3) Adjacency Pairs: more or less predictable utterances which follow each other
- 4) Turn-taking: identifying when someone is finishing his/her turn
- 5) Opening and Closing: less obvious ways of initiating and concluding
- 6) Topic: Appropriateness, cultural awareness, taboo subjects

- 7) Stress and Intonation: their use in opening, maintaining, turn-taking and ending
- 8) Gesture and Body Language: culture-specific appropriateness

I have found that these categories provide a very useful framework for planning speaking activities because they ensure that the class has a clear focus. This is particularly important for students whose learning style demands labelling of what they are doing in class.

Bygate (1987 p15) identifies four ways in which speakers can facilitate production of speech:

- a) parataxis i.e. by simplifying structure e.g. tacking new sentences on to previous ones with co-ordinating conjunctions like “and”, “but”, “or”.
- b) ellipsis i.e. by omitting parts of a sentence e.g. “Over there”, “Last week”
- c) by using formulaic expressions e.g. “I’m pleased to meet you”, “Have a nice day”
- d) time-creating strategies i.e. filler, pause and hesitation phrases such as “well” and “you know”, rephrasing or repeating what one or the other person has said.

In my experience teaching in an English speaking country, classroom speaking activities prepare students to notice these strategies in native speakers and to produce them themselves.

2.4 Negotiation Skills

An essential skill in transactional exchange is the ability to signal understanding during an exchange. This is an aspect which is specific to a speech event in real time since it is impossible for a writer to correct any misunderstanding of what has been written.

The skill of communicating ideas clearly is the “negotiation of meaning” (Bygate 1987, p27). The speaker has to choose the level of explicitness and then employ procedures to ensure that understanding takes place. It is important for intermediate learners to become aware of strategies to employ when they cannot find the exact word or expression. “Knowledge of various ways of getting things repeated, or clarified, or indeed how to repeat and clarify things themselves, is likely to be highly useful” (Bygate 1987, p33).

The second negotiation skill, the “management of interaction” refers to the business of agreeing who is going to speak next (turn taking), and what he or she is going to talk about (agenda management).

Efficient turn-taking requires five abilities:

- a) knowing how to signal that one wants to speak
- b) recognising the right moment to get a turn
- c) knowing how to use one’s turn properly
- d) recognising other people’s signals of their desire to speak
- e) knowing how to let someone else have a turn

These are skills which students employ in their own language. The challenge for the teacher is to help them to transfer these skills to English.

3. Learner problems

Outside the classroom, because speaking takes place in real time, it presents challenges for the learner. Different speech events have varying degrees of predictability, formality and reciprocity. Difficulties with speaking in general are due to lack of confidence, lack of practice, lack of survival English, problems in understanding and inability to listen effectively. Non-linguistic factors such as inappropriate physical distance need to be addressed too.

In addition, because immigration is a relatively new phenomenon in Ireland, many Irish people are not used to slowing their speech in order to make allowances for non-native speakers. Students are finding it an additional pressure to cope with this, as well as a certain lack of patience and tolerance on the part of some natives.

3.1 Not knowing how to say something

This is the most fundamental difficulty facing the student. Students remark to me that while they have relatively few problems during speaking lessons in class, they encounter difficulties when speaking to native speakers in real situations. They are anxious not to make grammatical mistakes and to acquire sufficient vocabulary in order to express themselves. Although I have rarely heard learners articulate their difficulties in terms of spoken discourse, solutions can be found by raising the students' awareness of strategies which can buy them time and give them a way round the problem. Students employ speaking strategies such as circumlocution, rephrasing, hedging and the use of fillers in their own language but need guidance and practice to transfer these to their spoken English.

3.2 Dealing with the unexpected

Even the most confident speakers encounter difficulties when faced with the unexpected in transactional exchanges. Communication breaks down when one speaker misunderstands the other. I have seen that students often give up because they don't know how to deal with breakdown. Learners need to focus on how to clarify, seek clarification, check understanding, indicate difficulties and repair conversation.

3.3 Turn-taking and Formulaic Expressions.

Many students are unaware of the conventions associated with turn-taking in English. As a result, they may take too long about thinking about what to say or they not realise when it is their or other's turn to speak. In addition, they may not know how to interrupt or disagree, or they may do these things inappropriately. Learners do not recognise or employ intonation shifts, facial gestures or body language which signal a new turn.

Students are often unfamiliar with culture-specific ways of opening and closing transactions, conventional utterance-responses (adjacency pairs), parataxis and ellipsis. Learners may have few problems with the latter in written texts but their knowledge may not transfer to speaking or listening. Students often speak more formally than is necessary, possibly because they have been taught to speak in full sentences. Although they are not making mistakes, their utterances place a strain on the listener because more information is being conveyed than necessary. I have noticed a tendency on my part to insist that learners speak in complete sentences. I

have learnt that this might be doing students a disservice since they seem to find it difficult to unlearn this later on.

3.4 Hidden meanings

Sometimes words and phrases have culture specific meanings which the students are not aware of. In my teaching context, I have noticed that some learners run the risk of being misunderstood because of these connotations. For example, a student told me that when offering work colleagues tea or coffee she innocently asked “Would anyone like a drink?” She did not realise that in Ireland such a question is understood to mean an alcoholic drink and she was embarrassed by the reaction.

3.5 Functions

Some learners have particular difficulties with certain functions which may be performed quite differently in their own culture. For example, Italian students can seem quite impolite when requesting something because the language they use is too direct and the intonation too narrow. Similarly, learners from more reserved cultures such as Scandinavians, tend not to naturally engage in a brief interactional exchange before conducting a transactional exchange. Students are often unaware that there are many ways to agree and disagree, accept or decline invitations, express certainty or uncertainty.

4. Strategies

It is essential to prepare students for these transactional exchanges by focusing on a limited number of functions that they are likely to use such as greeting, interrupting, clarifying, expressing preferences and describing feelings/symptoms. In real life situations, students need to process both linguistic and non-linguistic information rapidly in order to be effective communicators. The role of the teacher is to develop these skills and to provide a safe environment in which learners can practise them.

4.1 Explaining what you want

The need for students to develop their circumlocution strategies is addressed in English File Intermediate Unit 4 (OUP 1999). Immediately following a shopping vocabulary-building task, there is a task where the students first listen to a tape of a shopper describing what she wants without knowing the name of the items in English. Students' attention is drawn to phrases such as "it's a sort of" and "it's a thing you use for". Students then practise using these phrases in pairs by asking for items which are illustrated in the book. I find it very effective to use realia here. The students who are to act as customers are discreetly shown items such as a stapler or lip-balm. They choose an item they don't know the word for. They then have to ask the sales assistant for it, using the strategies that they have learnt.

4.2 Dealing with the unexpected

Role-play is virtually the only way we can give learners the opportunity to practise improvising real-life spoken language in the classroom. Because role-plays are usually based on real life situations, the speech produced is close to genuine discourse. In addition, I have found that at all levels, students find it easier to think of what to say. It is most effective if students are confident and co-operative. However, inhibited or anxious learners can find it uncomfortable or embarrassing (Ur, 1996, p133). I have found this to be particularly true of Japanese students. There may be something to be said for such learners to learn dialogues off by heart. Alternatively, I find that the use of role cards can help, especially at lower levels. The "telephoning" role-play in Klippel (1984, p123) is a very good example, in which students are given role cards that contain some piece of unexpected information. The students practise strategies such as clarifying and hesitating.

4.3 Turn-taking and Formulaic Expressions

The tasks in Carter & McCarthy (1997) are very good for raising awareness of features of natural spoken English. In Unit 11 (At the post office), for example, students can listen to and examine the transcript of three authentic exchanges. There is both a general and line-by-line commentary which highlight features such as discourse markers and ellipsis.

The challenge for the teacher using this material is to move the learners on to a production activity. One possibility, depending on the needs of the learners and their preferred learning style, would be to use this Unit as a model text in a task-based lesson on transactional exchanges.

4.4 Hidden Meanings

An activity in Tomalin & Stemplenski(1993, p135) tackles the issue of what they call “trap words”. The lesson’s aim is to raise awareness of mismatches between linguistic meaning and cultural connotation. Ten such words and phrases are proposed. In pairs, students have to make up a dialogue using them. They rehearse and then present the dialogue. Then there is a discussion reflecting on their use/misuse. I have adapted the activity by adding to the items they suggest some words and phrases which can help their speaking in Ireland e.g. “I’m grand” (a common answer to the question “how are you?”)

4.5 Functions

In the new edition of Cutting Edge (Longman 2005), issues such as sounding polite (modules 2 & 5) and accepting and declining invitations (module 7) are addressed explicitly under the heading “Real Life”. In module 12 (page 131), students are asked to guess the relationship between people who are saying goodbye to each other. They listen to the tape and fill in the gaps. This is a useful exercise for introducing students to thirteen different ways of saying goodbye. As well as adding typical Irish phrases such as “Take it easy”, I would draw learners’ attention to ways of disengaging from exchanges such as “Right”, “Anyway”, “I’d better not keep you” which serve as as preamble s to goodbyes.

5. Conclusion

Although surrounded by transactional exchanges in an English speaking country, many learners need to practise skills in the relatively safe and supportive

environment of the classroom. The teacher has to design activities which simulate real communication in the real world as closely as possible.

I see the need for authentic materials to support teachers who wish to help learners with aspects of transactional discourse. The latest edition of *Cutting Edge* is a step in the right direction. However, in spite of time and technical challenges, I am very interested in finding ways to build a corpus of recordings for use with my students.

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