

Lexis, Speaking and the Non-Native Speaker Teacher

By Hugh Dellar

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I should begin with a confession. Despite the fact that as a teacher, teacher trainer and coursebook writer, I spend a lot of time travelling the world, I do not speak a vast number of foreign languages. In fact, apart from my native English, I only possess passable Upper-Intermediate Indonesian. As such, I frequently feel stupid when abroad. The flight out of Heathrow or Gatwick transforms me from a witty, articulate, charming man into a bumbling oaf capable only of clutching my array of phrasebooks as I stutter my way through ordering coffees and explaining that I don't speak the local language very well. Nevertheless, I am all-too painfully aware of the kinds of conversations I would LIKE to be able to have in other languages and I suspect that in this, I differ very little from most Elementary students around the world. I would like to be able to ask people for directions AND to have some chance of understanding their answers; I'd like to be able to ask how people are, what their names are and where they're from; I'd like to know what people do both at work and in their free time, and so on. I know - in English - the kinds of fixed and semi-fixed expressions and routines and conversations I would like to acquire in other languages. I also obviously would like some grammar to slowly emerge out of all this communication, but first and foremost I would like to learn how to say things of immediate, pertinent use.

The reason I start by telling you this is that my travels have also made me aware of just how remarkably FLUENT the vast majority of non-native speaker teachers (NNSTs) of English are. By this, I DON'T mean that I've been impressed by your grammatical accuracy or your grasp of the Third Conditional. Rather, when speaking to many of you, I've been impressed with your grasp of idiom and metaphor, your precise use of phrases like It's not the end of the world, It might be worth a try and It shouldn't be a problem. Whether you realise it or not, you are all perfect examples of good lexical learners!

I would just briefly like to recap what lexis is and why I believe it's so central to speaking. At a lower level, it means mainly things like basic collocations - verb / noun collocations (and colligations!) - like I'm going shopping, I made a mistake, Do you want to have something to eat? - and adjective / noun collocations - The traffic's really heavy, That's a difficult question, This food is delicious - as well as fixed expressions - How's it going?, Not too bad, Not as often as I used to. At higher levels, it also starts to include more idioms - It's on the tip of my tongue, It completely slipped my mind, I wouldn't trust him an inch - and metaphors - We got side-tracked, I felt like I'd reached a bit of a cross-roads, We're wasting precious time here, and so on. If you could count the

number of these kinds of items you yourself have picked up, you'd soon be into the tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. We all draw on this vast stock as we catch up with old friends, discuss films or conference talks or plays we've been to see, bitch, moan, flirt, compliment and so on. In fact, without this vast store, we would be totally unable to speak in real time.

One of the most problematic aspects of speaking in a foreign language - both in class and outside of it - is the sheer speed at which things happen. Simply putting words to our thoughts takes time, stringing them all together takes time, keeping the floor takes time. If we then add to this one or two or three other speakers - possibly speakers who are more fluent than we are - all talking as well, in a way which we need to follow if we are to contribute to the conversation, then things become seemingly nigh-on impossible. So how on earth DO we manage to cope?

Well, one thing that's clear is we-do-not-put-our-utterances-together-in-a-word-by-word-kind-of-way! When we speak fluently, we're NOT using the fall-back plan of grammar plus words. Rather, we remember and re-use whole collocations, expressions, sentences and even conversations we've had many times before. The implications of this are that if we want our students to be able to string language together in such a way that they can keep their end up in real time conversation, we need to be giving them the most concise, condensed ways of saying things - and these are always lexical! The greater the time pressures learners are under - and classroom speaking activities often place learners under quite considerable time pressures - the more they need to be able to fall back on pre-fabricated chunks and memorised routines. As such, we need to ensure that our students are spending lots of their classroom time studying lexis, processing lexis and using lexis.

OK. I have outlined my thoughts on both lexis and speaking and would now like to move on to explore how this connects to you as Non-Native Speaker Teachers. As you all know, there remains in the EFL world a lot of prejudice against NNSTs. All too often, parental expectations lead to a demand for native speakers; this has a knock-on effect on school employment policies, which in turn affects the relative earning power of native and non-natives speaker teachers. Then there is the thorny issue of what qualifications are necessary before one can start teaching. I myself benefited from this mad disparity by flying off to Asia at the tender age of 23, armed only with a CTEFLA certificate following a 4-week course, but officially ready and able to earn many times more than my local counterparts, despite the fact most of them possessed both degrees and Master's in English and English-language Teaching. In many countries I have visited, a system of semi-apartheid operates, whereby native speakers get the plum fluency and conversation classes, whilst NNSTs are relegated to bilingual grammar lessons. Fairly understandably, as a result of all this obvious bias, many NNSTs end up with an inferiority complex - and, sadly, many native-speakers end up with the opposite! These complexes manifest themselves most clearly when it comes to the attitudes teachers have about teaching lexis. From taking my ideas off around the world over the last few years, I have met with a lot of positive responses to the whole idea of lexical teaching, but have also encountered time and time again the same string of

objections to the notion of it being something anyone other than native speakers could - or should - be doing. I'd like to address these objections, connect them to the kinds of speaking that happen in your classrooms and outline why YOU - and not people like myself in the minority group of native-speaker teachers - are actually the ideal lexical teachers!

OK. Objection Number One: Lexis is culturally-rooted and it's more appropriate for NNSTs to stick to grammar. The first point to make here is that anyone who believes that grammar exists as a safe haven clear of the vagaries of fashion, time or geography has obviously never encountered the wild and wonderful things the Irish do with will; the growing use of the one-size-fits-all Estuary English question tag innit? or the huge differences in the way British and American speakers of English use the Present Perfect! So to what degree do lexical items carry cultural meanings and values? Well, take a minute to peruse the following list of lexical items and consider the degree to which they seem to you to be culturally bound, by which I mean the degree to which they would need to be explained by referring to specifically British cultural phenomenon.

I woke up late
She's had her nose pierced
I can't stand this song
I've lost my appetite
I can give you a lift, if you want
You shouldn't have said that
He's been cheating on her
This place is a tip!
I felt like a fish out of water
He's certainly got fire in his belly
They gave the plan the thumbs-up
It's all part of the Nick Hornbyisation of Lad-Lit
It's like the Shankhill Road round there
There's been a big rise in Yardie gun crime
She's got a really strong Scouse accent

I would argue that it is only the last four items given here that require specific rooting in Britain. These are all nouns defining things probably unique to Britain. The rest - even the idioms - can be explained through reference to Singapore, Poland or Peru, should the teacher decide that's for the best. They may also have local L1 equivalents. Of course, some NNSTs may not know all of these items, but that is another, separate issue and one I shall address later on. So sure, then, some lexical items ARE culturally rooted in British life, but it also needs stating that for EFL Learners, the more useful the language, the LESS it will be of this nature. EFL students are learning the English language, not British culture, and it is our responsibility as teachers to ensure that the kind of language we are exposing students to is as free of cultural-rootedness as possible, especially at Pre-

Advanced levels. As such, I personally would never include the last four items in my General English classes - or in my coursebooks!

Those of us prone to worry about language and culture being inextricably intertwined need to bear in mind the fact that a vast range of literature is written in English - British National Party propaganda, anti-colonial tracts, fundamentalist religious tracts, pro-legalisation of cannabis pamphlets - and all give voice to very different cultural values, yet all are expressed through English! It is texts which express cultural values, NOT the language which inherently encodes them!

The second objection to non-native speaker teachers teaching lexically that I've encountered is the fact that I know more English than you do. Quite probably, this is true. I've spent the vast majority of my life in English-speaking contexts. I speak English with almost all of my friends. I read a lot - and all of it in English. I probably know a whole raft of slang and idioms and obscure lexical items that most of you don't. Well, all I can say about that is so what?!? If you sit and watch a desert with a camel walking across the horizon, from second to second, it'll be the camel that attracts your attention, despite the fact that it is only maybe 5% of your actual field of vision. We naturally - and, possibly, for good evolutionary reasons - notice difference rather than similarity. As such, many non-native speaker teachers fixate on that which divides us - the 5% - rather than that which UNITES us - the 95%! Much of the 5% that's specific in my own speech may well be very low frequency among NATIVE-speakers themselves and thus of little - if any - use to EFL students. Possibly, in fact, some of it may even be totally idiosyncratic to me! There is also the additional fact that as non-native speaker teachers, you have one major advantage over native-speaker teachers in this respect: YOU are actually far better aspirational models of English than I am! EFL students can possibly aspire to becoming YOU - very fluent, articulate speakers of English as a foreign language, able to talk to a wide range of friends and colleagues - by no means just native-speakers, but also Greeks, Germans and so on. Unfortunately, short of a lucky reincarnation, they can NEVER become me. Your non-native speaker status also means that you've actually LEARNED English - as opposed to having just picked it up through fluke of birth. You also speak your own L1 and are thus far more aware than I could ever be of the kinds of problems - both lexical and grammatical - that your students will have while learning English.

I think another fear connected to this whole area is a fairly deep-rooted concern that many NNSTs have: the fear of getting caught out! 'What if the coursebook I'm using has phrases I've never seen before?', 'What if students ask me questions about an idiom that I've got no idea about?', 'What if I try to reformulate what my students are saying on the board and it's wrong - by native-speaker standards?! Well, hello?!?!@! Welcome to being a teacher! ALL native-speaker teachers find themselves on the spot with alarming regularity. We are all too often asked questions by students that we simply don't know the answers to, and there is only sane response to this - confess and be done with it! Committing the following fixed phrases to memory has helped me through countless potentially embarrassing moments in the classroom. I recommend you try the same!

“I’m not sure, but I THINK this is how it’s used”

“I’ve never heard that in my life - so it can’t be very useful!”

Also - just as I and thousands of other native-speaker teachers have had to spend years not only mugging up on grammar from the notes in the back of the coursebooks we were using, but also on the difference in the way we use sick and ill or injury and wound - developing your collocational awareness and your ability to access USAGE under time pressure is something all of us need to be working on, all of the time. And the journey is much like the Buddhist journey of one thousand miles - that nevertheless has to begin with the first step!

EFL has traditionally been yoked in by a tyranny of grammatical accuracy and ludicrously large amounts of time have been expended trying to induce it in our learners - despite the fact that for most learners, 100% accuracy NEVER fully emerges, despite the fact that we actually use far less grammar in our day-to-day lives than many EFL books might lead us to believe and despite the fact that grammarians themselves never fully agree as to what is and what isn’t correct usage. I believe we would do well to avoid replacing this tyranny with a tyranny of collocational accuracy! If your paraphrase or reformulation of a student’s output is slightly off, so what?!? It’s almost certainly better than what the student was saying beforehand. To give you an example of what I mean here, a Polish trainee on a recent CELTA course I was doing heard a student saying It’s not good use my time during a discussion students were engaged in. She wrote up on the board It’s w..... of my time and rounded off the speaking slot by eliciting the word waste. OK - It’s waste of my time isn’t EXACTLY what I’d say - It’s a waste of time - but it’s a darn sight closer than It’s not good use my time. We need to move away from the Close, but no cigar mentality and accept instead that things are close enough. The whole criteria for reformulation should be NOT “Is this exactly what native-speakers say” but rather “Will my students sound better saying this?”

One final fear I’ve often heard NNSTs voice is that the monolingual classroom is different! Well, in some ways, it obviously is, but in many perhaps less obvious ways, it actually ISN’T. With regard to this, we would do well to remember the fact that simply sharing a nationality with someone does not mean you will have anything in common. Any national culture is inevitably a macro-culture, containing within in it a myriad of micro-cultural activities and perspectives. The very notion of a solitary national culture is outdated and unrealistic and fails to take into account the global discourses many of us participate in, our own backgrounds, families, tastes, hobbies and so on. OK. To my mind, everything from cricket to ballet to opera, from curry to whisky to marijuana and from reggae to direct action protests to Islam are part of British culture, but in no way can all of them be part of every British person’s culture! There’s no way one can predict which micro-cultures any one individual will partake of: there’s no reason, for example, why fish and chips and Hinduism should be incompatible, and you will meet those Brits for whom punk rock and ballet are of equal importance. It is, as they say, horses for courses. Cultures change; they exist in a constant state of flux; debates and

arguments within them emerge, flare up and fade away. And this is just as true in your country as it is in Britain. The most obvious implication of this is that even mono-lingual classes such as yours will never be mono-cultural. The best way we can deal with this fact is to simply treat our learners as the complex, interesting, diverse group of people that they are! A further responsibility lies with coursebook writers such as myself, who have a duty to reduce the number of questions which ask students to talk about their own national cultures as though these were homogenous, monolithic things all Germans, Japanese, Brazilians, etc. had in common.

A further bonus about teaching in a monolingual context from your point of view is that you know a lot about the macro-culture of the country your students come from and are living in and can use this knowledge to peg new language onto. Just as knowing about Japan helps me explain what right-wing means to a student from Nagasaki through reference to the right-wing *uyoku* groups there and knowing about *Hikikomori* - Japanese kids who become bedroom recluses in their teens - helps me explain He's led a very sheltered life, so YOU can refer to local cultural phenomenon, characters, events, TV shows, musicians and trends to help your students find English more memorable.

So what are the implications of all of this for the kinds of speaking activities that can help NNSTs teach lexically in the monolingual classroom? The fact that you're non-native speaker teachers has quite profound implications for both the kinds of speaking that you can engage in with your students and also that you can facilitate. However, I'm afraid that at this stage I have to tell you that far too many of you have been duped by one of the greatest tricks ever pulled by native-speaker teachers. Stuck on our sad and lonely little islands of monolingualism, we've somehow managed to persuade all you more or less bilingual folk that TRANSLATION IN A VERY BAD THING!

Let's get real here - for all but the most Advanced learners of English, translation is inevitable, whether it be conscious or unconscious. And in the wider world, it's absolutely crucial: NATO, the UN, the EU, the Middle East Peace process (so-called) - all would crumble without translation. Some of my very favourite books I've read IN TRANSLATION - and they're great things! It seems to me that in a mono-lingual classroom, translation lies at the very heart of some of the more interesting kinds of speaking we can be doing. Obviously, I'd be the first to accept that there are obviously real problems with translation. But, interestingly, the real problems with it come when we apply it to a misrepresentation of how language really works. The two areas notoriously resistant to translation are isolated words and structural grammar. Grammar gains meanings through contrastive analysis with other structures in the same language NOT through translation. I don't know how they translate into your L1, but if I translate I'm going there tomorrow, I'll go there tomorrow and I'm going to go there tomorrow into Indonesian, my main foreign language, they all come out the same - *Saya akan pergi ke desana besok*. The translation does not begin to help me understand the difference in

meaning between them. Only comparing the three of them as they are used in ENGLISH can help me do this.

Similarly, if you take a word in English out of context - almost any word, but especially one with relatively low semantic content - let's say rough. It's impossible to translate on its own. A rough guess is as different from rough skin as The sea was a bit rough is from I'm feeling a bit rough this morning. Translation only really comes into its own when you accept that language is lexical.

If you buy the idea that meaning is fairly central to English language teaching, then I think it's hard NOT to accept that translation can a key tool in the pursuit of it. One obvious use of translation is as an aide memoire of the type you see below.

English :Your language:I'd give it a miss if I were you.It's well worth a visit.It's a real tourist trap.It's a nice thing to do.

The English expressions on the left are some of those that came up in one of my classes over a week and were given to my students near the end of Friday's lesson. They translated them in groups, though this could also obviously be done in pairs, individually as homework or by the teacher with the whole class. I then begin Mondays by asking students to fold the sheet in half and to use L1 to re-elicite from each other the English expressions. Obviously, in a mono-lingual class this can be done by you as teachers to a whole class as good, pat-on-the-back type energiser in your first lesson on the week. This may strike some of you as parrot-learning and it unashamedly IS. Once you get your head round the fact that fluent speakers have at their disposal tens of thousand of expressions like this, you realise that 20,000 gap-fills or 20,000 flash-cards just aren't going to do the job. Translation can serve as a scaffold and a short-cut to the learning of large numbers of lexical items.

At a lower level, this kind of translation is nigh-on essential, taking into account as it does students' natural tendencies to compare L2 with L1. At a higher level, however, where for far too long it's been stated that we should wean students off it, as if it were some kind of mother's milk or addictive drug, it can - if used in small doses - simply be INTERESTING. For instance, I've learned that in Spanish, It's not nothing comes out as It's not turkey snot, whilst the Swedish for I've got pins and needles is My legs have turned to lemonade. Anything which helps our students find language in general more interesting and helps them notice it more and pore over it more can only be a good thing!

One complaint I often come up against from NNSTs is the fact that students in mono-lingual classes often speak L1 in class and seem very unmotivated to speak English. I think this may well be true, and it was certainly true of my time spent teaching in Asia. However, I think it's unhelpful to see this as a problem and much more sensible to regard it as an opportunity. Look on the bright side - your students are talking to each other! There are things they wish to discuss or chat about, and these L1 conversations can easily serve as the basis for the kind of conversations in English that you set about trying to facilitate. I think often

students trying to speak English get stuck in grammar and worry about producing 'correct' grammatical responses. On top of this hurdle, there's also the fact that they often lack sufficient language to fully express themselves in L2. Given this, my inclination would be to USE L1 to get at English. Say, for example, students are arguing about a newspaper article when you walk in, or something on the news, you can give them five minutes in their L1 to write - or tape - the conversation they're having. This is then translated, with plenty of help from the teacher. This kind of activity helps students to think about how conversation works in general - and I think the kinds of conversations people have are basically fairly similar whichever language they're having them in. It helps learners to process content, theoretically then leaving more brain space for students to pay attention to language in L2. The use of L1 thus serves as a kind of planning time. I think perhaps we also need to worry LESS about L2 production in class and switch instead to a "Do you know how to say that in English?" kind of approach, which may well give students language which they may or may not choose to use in future, but which at least resembles their own L1 language use.

There is one problem, however, that I believe does come up frequently in monolingual classes: students usually know each other quite well and also share much of the same knowledge of the macro-culture of the country they reside in, which makes them understandably reluctant to talk about what happens in their country. I'd like to suggest some kinds of speaking that I feel are appropriate in such contexts. The first is more speaking in English ABOUT English! A colleague of mine used to work in a German secondary school and was once asked to sit in and observe a class a man she worked with was teaching. He said he'd been having trouble motivating the group and had resorted to a complex task-based approach and project to try to counter this and wanted feedback on it. The class was very-well planned - the students were doing a project on Global Warming and the teacher had brought a huge range of materials in for students to use: videos, a bank of press cuttings, radio interviews, web sites they could look up, and so on. and yet despite all this, a hard-core of students sat at the back of the class and looked bored and far from engaged. Once the bell had rung, my colleague grabbed three of these students and asked them what the problem was. The students grudgingly accepted the classes were well prepared, but said they were bored senseless by the topic. "We've done Global Warming in geography, and looked at it in Ethics classes as well, and then our Religion teacher did a thing on it last month and NOW we're doing it again." My colleague asked them what they'd prefer to talk about and they gawked at her as if she were stupid before muttering "Well, uh, in English classes, we figured ENGLISH might be good!"

I feel the best way to get to more talking about English is to rethink the way we check concepts and move instead towards what I call Asking Questions About Language Which Generate Language. On my own initial (one month!) teacher training course, I had to write a concept check for the lexical phrase kicked out of the team. I was told at the time that the correct concept questions for this item were :

a. Was I in the team before?

b. Did I want to leave?

It now seems to me that what was going on here was an extension of the kind of closed Yes/No questions we concept check grammar with to such good effect into the unwitting realms of lexis. The result? Tedium for the class and only half the story, at best, of how the words are actually used. I would now instead ask the following questions:

- a. I got kicked out of the team by who?
- b. Why?
- c. Anything else you can be kicked out of?
- d. Who by?
- e. Why?

The interesting thing here is that while three of these questions are closed, display questions (I know a. must be 'the coach', whilst c. is 'a class' or 'a club' and d. is 'a teacher' or 'a bouncer'), the other two are open upto a point. The kinds of offerings students suggest here may well come from personal experience, are obviously needed if they are ever to talk about WHY things like this HAVE happened to them and afford an opportunity for humour and creativity on the students' parts. This kind of activity involves the whole class, allows the teacher to reformulate AND allows the possibility - if students wish to take it - of people in the group offering up personal anecdotes.

I think we also need to constantly bear in mind the kinds of conversations we ourselves actually have in our own mother tongues. I don't know about you, but in MY L1, I've never discussed the pros and cons of square fruit, extolled the merits of pizza as opposed to Paris or tried to work out the exact chronological sequence of an abduction by talking briefly to twelve different people, all of whom had cards telling them which twelfth of the story they were witness to - and yet I'm ashamed to say I've subjected my EFL students to all of this madness and more! The see-sawing between wild flights of free-form flights of fluency and more rigidly-limited grammar practice so prevalent in EFL materials has got to go! In its place, I'd like to see students TRY to talk above their current level using language given to them AT their level! By this, I simply mean that for an Upper-Intermediate student, get kicked out and turned out to be, say, seem to me to be suitable items of input. However, the student who wants to talk about the time he was kicked out of a football team because someone stole the coach's whistle and he got blamed for it even though it wasn't his fault or the student who wants to talk about how her first impression of her boy-friend was that he was mean and horrible and selfish, but how he turned out to be everything she'd ever dreamed of should be encouraged to do so through carefully-worded personalised questions, but will need the teacher's help and language to do so well! I realise that in monolingual classrooms, many students may well slip back into their own L1 whilst attempting to tell their stories - and I think this is fine. Round up by giving them the English they were doing so to avoid!

OK. I hope I have gone at least some way towards combating any inferiority complexes you may have been carrying around before reading this article and also hope I have suggested some fruitful directions for you to explore further. The rest I leave in your own capable hands!

To close, I should acknowledge that you may, at this stage, be surprised to notice an absence of bibliography. This is partly due to my inability to sift through the swathes of material I've read during my teaching career, partly because these are all ideas I've developed myself and in collaboration with colleagues (though obviously I am not claiming they are all original or have never been written about before) and partly because I'd much rather you took up any further discussion of these issues with me by e-mail than that you went off and continued passively consuming the literature of the field!

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