Teachers Telling Tales: Materials for Teaching Spoken Language

1. Introduction

Thanks to corpora, we now know more than ever before about what native speakers of English actually do when they speak the language The publication of substantial sections on the grammar of spoken English in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber et al 1999) and the Cambridge Grammar of English (Carter and McCarthy 2006) is clear evidence of the considerable corpus-based research into spoken language which has been carried out in recent years. The challenge for teachers and materials writers is to decide what to do with these detailed and ever more comprehensive descriptions of spoken language. This article seeks to address that challenge.

2. The nature of the challenge

There are both sociocultural and methodological aspects to the challenge. I would like to deal with the sociocultural aspect first, albeit briefly. There is a certain irony in the fact that, at a time when we know more than ever about native speaker language, the relevance of what native speakers do has never been more open to question. The frequent and growing use of English between non-native speakers has led many to question the pedagogic relevance of native speaker English, particularly spoken forms which might be seen as a kind of badge of cultural identity. This aspect of the debate has been best summed up by Prodromou (1998: 266): "What is real for the native speaker may also be real, say, for the learner studying in Britain, but it may be unreal for the EFL learner in Greece and surreal for the ESL learner in Calcutta." There are two reasons, however, why I do not want to spend too long on this aspect of the debate (See Carter 1998 and Timmis 2003; 2005 for a fuller debate):

1. I am writing for a practical journal.
2. I believe that the question of whether we should teach spoken language in the classroom will ultimately be settled by testing it in the classroom rather than in conference articles or the pages of journals (though practice should be informed by that debate).

The methodological aspect of the challenge is two-fold:

1. What kind of spoken material should we use in the classroom?
2. What kind of tasks and activities should we design to exploit the material?

We will now look at each of these questions in turn.

3. Finding spoken material for the classroom

As spoken language features are so closely dependent on factors such as the context in which they are produced, the nature of the discourse and the relationship between the speakers, there will be a natural preference to look for authentic dialogues to use in the classroom. Here lies the challenge: can we find dialogues which contain typical features of spoken language and which are also interesting to listen to and culturally accessible? A conversation between my brother and me, for example, about the

football match we have just watched, will be full of features which typify evaluative language, but it is unlikely to be of interest to people who haven't seen the match and don't support the same team (or haven't even heard of the team). Indeed, the references to players, places and people closely connected to the match may make our conversation not just uninteresting, but also inaccessible to others. I want to suggest here that one possible answer to the challenge of finding suitable material lies within us: our own anecdotes.

Teacher talk has often suffered from an indiscriminate ban imposed by pre-service training courses, but constructively used, it has enormous potential. Davies (2002) makes a strong case for the use of 'teacher-generated biography as input material' and while he is not writing specifically about teaching spoken language, a number of his points are relevant here. The most obvious point in favour of using teacher-generated material is that it exploits the natural curiosity students have about their teachers. It has often struck me that, while many activities typical of the communicative classroom require learners to divulge things about themselves, the same demands are rarely made on teachers. Teacher talk has, then, motivational value: "They [Teacher-generated materials] are immediately more relevant and accessible to learners…and therefore far more likely to achieve the objective of stimulating learners' curiosity as a prerequisite to motivating them to engage productively with the topic of the lesson Davies 2002: 369). In terms of spoken language, teacher-generated material exploits, I would argue, the relationship of trust and respect that one generally finds between teachers and students. Features of spoken language have often suffered from the judgement that they are messy, impure or even socially inferior. If learners hear their teachers using such features, however, they *may* form a more positive view. Davies' (2002: 374) argument that, 'An important part of the teacher's function is to show learners what it is possible to achieve through the medium of true communication' is also interesting in considering the role of teachers in modelling spoken language. A further advantage of using teachers' anecdotes for spoken language materials is that teachers will be able to gauge the kind of cultural content which will be interesting and accessible for the learners and will also be on hand to explain specific cultural references. Indeed, Davies (2002: 369) argues in more general terms that an important role for the teacher is to act as a kind of window on the target culture: "Teacher-generated biography can provide precisely the accessibility [to the target language culture] that learners need, and through the personal life experiences, past and present, of the teacher, they can access sociocultural themes at 'first hand'".

I would like to describe now a practical example of teacher-generated material. I invited 4 colleagues round to my house one evening (the deal was, 'If I get my data, you get your dinner'), put a flat microphone on the table, gave each a glass of wine and started the ball rolling with the question, 'How, when and why did you get involved in English language teaching?' I exerted minimal control of the conversation as the question naturally produced digressions including how one of my colleagues had met her husband, the unfavourable impression my wife and I had of each other at first meeting and a colleague's passion for flamenco dancing. As the material was recorded and as the conversation was initiated by a pre-arranged question, the pedantic might dispute the authenticity of the material, but it was certainly unscripted and produced a host of features typical of spoken language. Davies (2002: 371) sums up the authenticity issue very neatly: "…teacher-produced written or taped biographical does not possess the authenticity of original

purpose....but rather derives credibility from its existence as an accurate representation of real experiences". Below are examples of some (by no means all) of the features I found when I transcribed the conversations which might be of interest to learners.

Colloquial lexis e.g.

- Okay, first question is **dead simple**;
- Sorry, I was being very **nosy**

Discourse markers e.g.

- and then we thought we'd **you know** think about settling down and being a bit more serious about life and **so, anyway**, that's how I got into it.

Good listenership

A: I kind of realised that I didn't really wanna teach kids ever, cos
B: **Very wise**

A: ...I loved Japan, I loved all my...every job that I had doing TEFL I really enjoyed I really thought they were great, really good
B: **Lucky you**

Vague language

- Well, no, I had a primary school teaching qualification, yeah but it's nothing to do with like TEFL **or anything**
- I didn't want to quite settle down yet **and stuff like that**
- A: **Well**, it's **I think** it's something that you fall into **a bit though, isn't it,**

Idiom/metaphor

- and wanting to **get off the conveyor belt** and just do something different
- because I studied a year abroad as part of my degree and just **got the bug to** go off doing stuff

'Tails' (Carter and McCarthy 2006) e.g.

- I remember thinking it was really adventurous **that**
- Nice, **these olives**

Non-standard forms e.g.

- **we were sat** on the beach in Brighton looking at the newspaper
- I think there**'s** plenty of people who think that way

Quite apart from the potentially interesting language features, it became apparent to me while I was transcribing the conversations that they offered interesting 'cultural

windows'. I would like to take 2 examples to illustrate what I mean by 'cultural windows'. The remarks are from the recorded conversation and the questions are ones I think it would be potentially useful and interesting for the learners to discuss as they may reveal different cultural expectations.

1. 'I didn't want to settle down and stuff like that.' What kind of things is the speaker referring to be 'stuff like that' in this context?

2. 'I studied a year abroad as part of my degree and just got the bug to go off doing stuff'. What kind of things is the speaker referring to by 'stuff' in this context?

Brown (1990) has argued that training students to notice such 'cultural windows', and look through them, is an important skill for advanced students dealing with authentic texts. The examples above are a case in point.

4. Designing tasks and activities for spoken language

The first point to emphasise is that learners should be focused on the content of the text before they focus on particular language features. As I have already stressed the potential motivational value of teacher talk texts, it would be strange to ignore the content in the classroom. This means that the battery of tasks, which have grown with the communicative approach, for creating interest in a text and for checking general comprehension, can all be applied here. When we come to the tasks which focus on specific language features, I am going to argue that they should involve listening and noticing. The main justification for the emphasis on listening is that, ultimately, training learners to listen and notice is as valuable as any particular feature we can bring to their notice. We can also add the commonsense argument that spoken features are designed to be heard. Finally, in materials writing, as in life, I am a great believer in 2 for the price of 1, and there seems to me to be no reason why an activity shouldn't provide useful listening work and useful language work. To borrow an ecological metaphor from Scott Thornbury (2001), if a leaf can be food for one animal and shelter for another, then a task may be seen primarily as listening practice by one student and primarily as language work by another student. The kind of noticing tasks I am looking for are those which encourage learners to match the reality of spoken language with their expectations of it, as in the examples below.

1 a) Put 'kind of' into the sentence below.

"Oh yeah so then through that I realised that I didn't really wanna teach kids ever, cos"

b) Now listen and check if the speaker uses 'kind of' in the same place.

2 a) Which of the responses below are possible in reaction to David's sentence?

"Oh yeah so then through that I kind of realised that I didn't really wanna teach kids ever, cos"

i) I don't blame you
ii) Very wise
iii) Me too
iv) Really?

b) Now listen and check what the actual response was.

3a) Rearrange the phrases to make an intelligible question.

madly in love   to get a job   wasn't there   going back to   getting married some story about?

b) Now listen to the original sentence.

It is important to emphasise that, in using this kind of task, teachers and learners will more often be talking about possibilities and probabilities, whys and wherefores and choices rather than about right and wrong or grammatical and ungrammatical. Indeed, discussions about context and appropriacy are a crucial feature of this kind of task. There are 2 other points worth making about the tasks above:

1. They are 'light touch' activities which depart from the traditional 10 question exercise on one grammar point. To move from ecology to meteorology, I believe that with spoken grammar, frequent light showers are better than occasional heavy thunderstorms.

2. Production is not necessarily required, though neither is it outlawed. Even with 'orthodox grammar' there are doubts about the efficacy of the presentation and practice model and to these doubts we can add the doubt as to whether learners will want these features to be part of their active repertoire. Learners may, however, wish to experiment with these features if they are, for example, given the opportunity to relate their own anecdote or even to write a short sketch.

5. Conclusion

I have argued above that teachers' anecdotes, because they are motivating, accessible, and 'grammatically credible', offer a way for teachers and learners to experiment with teaching and learning spoken language in the classroom to see if they can benefit from the detailed and increasingly comprehensive descriptions of spoken language now available to us. I have referred a number of times in this article to Davies (2002) as his article helped me to articulate my rationale for using teachers' anecdotes as material for teaching spoken language, although, curiously, I read it *after* I had actually experimented with the idea. Anyway, the final word on this kind of materials design goes to him: "There is no doubt that the use of teacher-generated biography as input material requires the teacher to give a great deal in terms of personal commitment and openness, and it is perhaps not for the faint-hearted to attempt this risky approach to materials development." (Davies 2002: 374). Are we faint-hearted? Surely not.

References

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