

Current Trends in Teaching Listening and Speaking

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This article examines current trends in the teaching of listening and speaking and highlights some of the most important terminology used in contemporary professional discourse.

Acquiring good listening and speaking skills in English are the main concern of many second and foreign language learners, and today's English teacher needs to be well versed in current approaches to the teaching of the aural/oral skills. In this paper, current trends in the teaching of listening and speaking will be examined and some of the most important terminology that is used in contemporary professional discourse about each issue will be highlighted.

Purposes for learning English

Today, like it or not, English is the language of globalization, international communication, commerce and trade, the media and pop culture, and this affects motivations for learning it. English is no longer viewed as the property of the English-speaking world but is an international commodity sometimes referred to as *World English* or *English* as an *International Language*. The cultural values of Britain and the US are often seen as irrelevant to language teaching, except in situations where the learner has a pragmatic need for such information. The language teacher need no longer be an expert on British and American culture and a literature specialist as well. English is still promoted as a tool that will assist with educational and economic advancement but is viewed in many parts of the world as one that can be acquired without any of the cultural trappings that go with it. Proficiency in English is needed for employees to advance in international companies and improve their technical knowledge and skills. It provides a foundation for what has been called 'process skills' – those problem-solving and critical thinking skills that are needed to cope with the rapidly changing environment of the workplace, one where English is playing an increasingly important role.

Traditionally the target for learning was assumed to be a native-speaker variety of English and it was the native speaker's culture, perceptions, and speech that were crucial in setting goals for English teaching. The native speaker had a privileged status as 'owners of the language, guardians of its standards, and arbiters of acceptable pedagogic norms' (Jenkins 2000: 5). Today *local varieties* of English such as Filipino English and Singapore English are firmly established as a result of *indigenization*, and in contexts where English is a foreign language there is less of a pressure to turn foreign-language speakers of English (Koreans, Taiwanese, Japanese etc) into mimics of native speaker English,

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be it an American, British, or Australian variety. The extent to which a learner seeks to speak with a native-like accent and sets this as his or her personal goal, is a personal one. It is not necessary to try to eradicate the phonological influences of the mother tongue nor to seek to speak like a native speaker. Jennifer Jenkins in her recent book argues that received pronunciation (RP) is an unattainable and an unnecessary target for second language learners, and she proposes a phonological syllabus that maintains core phonological distinctions but is a reduced inventory from RP. A pronunciation syllabus for English as an International Language would thus not be a native-speaker variety but would be a phonological core that would provide for phonological intelligibility but not seek to eradicate the influence of the mother tongue.

Teaching listening

Listening, hardly mentioned at all in journals in the 1970s has today come into its own. Although it continues to be ignored in second language acquisition theory and research, at least in teaching it now plays a much more prominent role. University entrance exams, school leaving and other examinations have begun to include a listening component, acknowledging that listening proficiency is an important aspect of second language proficiency, and if it isn't tested, teachers won't pay attention to it. An early view of listening saw it as the mastery of discrete skills or *microskills* (e. g. Richards 1983) and that these should form the focus of teaching and testing.

A skills approach focused on such things as (Rost 1990):

- discriminating sounds in words, especially phonemic contrasts.
- deducing the meaning of unfamiliar words.
- predicting content.

- noting contradictions, inadequate information, ambiguities.
- differentiating between fact and opinion.

The changed status of listening was partly prompted by Krashen's emphasis on the role of comprehension and *comprehensible input*, i. e. the *input hypothesis*, in triggering language development, which lies at the heart of his *Natural Approach*. In the 80s and 90s applied linguists also began to borrow new theoretical models of comprehension from the field of cognitive psychology. It was from this source that the distinction between *bottom-up processing* and *top-down processing* was derived, a distinction that led to an awareness of the importance of background knowledge, and schema in comprehension. The *bottom-up model* holds that listening is a linear, data-driven process. Comprehension occurs to the extent that the listener is successful in decoding the spoken text. The *top-down model* of listening, by contrast, involves the listener in actively constructing meaning based on expectations, inferences, intentions, knowledge of *schema* and other relevant *prior knowledge* and by a selective processing of the input. Listening came to be viewed as an interpretive process. At the same time the fields of *conversation analysis* and *discourse analysis* were revealing a great deal about the organization of spoken discourse and led to a realization that written texts read aloud could not provide a suitable basis for developing the abilities needed to process real-time authentic discourse. *Authenticity* in materials became a catchword and part of a pedagogy of teaching listening that is now well established in TESOL.

Mendelsohn (1994) summarizes the assumptions underlying current methodology as:

- Listening materials should be based on a wide range of authentic texts, including both monologues and dialogues.
- Schema-building tasks should precede listening.
- Strategies for effective listening should be incorporated into the materials.
- Learners should be given opportunities to progressively structure their listening by listening to a text several times and by working through increasingly challenging listening tasks.
- Learners should know what they are listening for and why.
- Tasks should include opportunities for learners to play an active role in their own learning.

Teaching speaking

Speaking has always been a major focus of language teaching, however both the nature of speaking skills as well as approaches to teaching them have undergone a major shift in thinking in recent years. Speaking in the early 70s usually meant 'repeating after the teacher, reciting a memorized dialogue, or responding to a mechanical drill' (Shrum and Glisan 2000: 26), reflecting the sentence-based view of proficiency prevailing in the methodologies of Audiolingualism and Situational Language Teaching. The emergence of the constructs of *communicative competence* and *proficiency* in the 1980s led to major shifts in conceptions of syllabuses and methodology, the effects of which continue to be seen today. The theory of communicative competence prompted attempts at developing *communicative syllabuses* in the 1980s, initially resulting in proposals for *notional syllabuses*, *functional syllabuses*, as well as the *Threshold Level* and more recently proposals for *task-based* and *text-based* approaches to



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teaching. *Fluency* became a goal for speaking courses and this could be developed through the use of *information gap* and other tasks that required learners to attempt real communication despite limited proficiency in English. In so doing they would develop *communication strategies* and engage in *negotiation of meaning*, both of which were considered essential to the development of oral skills. Activities borrowed from the repertoire of techniques associated with *Cooperative Learning* became a good source of teaching ideas.

In foreign language teaching a parallel interest led to the *proficiency movement* in the 1990s, which attempted to develop descriptions of bands of proficiency across the different skills areas and to use these bands as guidelines in programme planning. The proficiency concept was said to offer an organizing principle that could help teachers establish course objectives, organize course content, and determine what students should be able to do upon completion of a course or programme of study.

Hadley proposes five principles for proficiency-oriented teaching:

- Opportunities must be provided for students to practise using the language in a range of contexts likely to be encountered in the target culture.
- Opportunities should be provided for students to carry out a range of functions (tasks) necessary for dealing with others in the target culture.
- The development of accuracy should be encouraged in proficiency-oriented instruction. As learners produce language, various forms of instruction and evaluative feedback can be useful in facilitating the progression of their skills toward more precise and coherent language use.
- Instruction should be responsive to the affective as well as the cognitive needs of students, and their different personalities, preferences, and learning styles should be taken into account.
- Cultural understanding must be promoted in various ways so that students are sensitive to other cultures and prepared to live more harmoniously in the target language community.
(Hadley 1993: 77)

The notion of English as an International Language has prompted a revision of the notion of communicative competence to that of *intercultural competence*, a goal for both native speakers and language learners and with a focus on learning how to communicate in ways that are appropriate in cross-cultural settings. At the same time it is now accepted that models for oral interaction cannot be based simply on the intuitions of applied linguists and textbook writers but should be informed by the findings of *conversation analysis* and *corpus analysis* of real speech. These have revealed such things as:

- the clausal nature of much spoken language and the role of *chunks* (sense or tone groups such as 'the other day/ I got a real surprise/ when I got a call/ from an old school friend').
- the frequency of fixed utterances or *conversational routines* in spoken language (e. g. *Is that right, You know what I mean*).
- the interactive and negotiated nature of oral interaction involving such processes as *turn-taking, feedback*, and *topic management*.
- the differences between *interactional talk* (person oriented) and *transactional talk* (message oriented).

Current approaches to the teaching of speaking thus reflect the following principles:

- Speaking and oral interaction is seen as the basis for learning.
- Non-native usage as well as native usage both serve as models.
- English for cross-cultural communication is a primary goal.
- Models in classroom materials are often informed by corpus analysis.
- Functional or other types of communicative syllabus predominate.
- Both accuracy and fluency are a primary goal with a greater tolerance of errors.
- Oral proficiency is viewed as dependent upon mastery of lexical phrases and conversational routines.
- Cultural awareness is addressed.
- Pair and group activities predominate in the classroom.

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