EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

Unit 7: Speaking



You may be involved in speaking English in a wide range of situations: chatting with friends, buying things in shops, asking directions in the street, discussing a problem in a tutorial, consulting a supervisor, giving a seminar presentation, and so on.

To speak effectively in another language we need a variety of "tools'. We will be exploring some of them in this unit and suggesting ways in which you can practise and improve using them in English.

Tools for speaking

Conversation is a complex activity, even in our first language, and can cause difficulties for either <u>speaker</u> or <u>listener</u>:

(1) As a <u>speaker</u> you may not remember the exact word or expression for what you want to say. In this case, you need to adopt one of a set of **communication strategies**, which involve

finding another way of expressing the desired meaning in a different form.

(2) When you are <u>listening</u>, you may not understand - or hear - the speaker, so you have to signal that there is a problem, so that the speaker and you can negotiate a way of resolving it between you. We refer to this as **conversational repair**.

We are going to look at these two aspects of speaking.

Communication strategies

Sometimes we do not know, or cannot remember, the precise word we need. This can happen in our first language too, but we are probably more aware of it when speaking another language. Here are five common strategies for dealing with this sort of problem:

Communication strategies in a second language

Approximation

Use a more general or related word; e.g. 'animal' instead of 'rabbit'

Paraphrase

Describe the appearance or function of the word; e.g. 'He cleaned the house with a... it 's the thing that sucks in air'

Invention

Invent a word made from second language; e.g. 'picture place' instead of 'art gallery'

Mime/gesture

Demonstrate the meaning with your hands, e.g. clapping to show 'applause'

Appeal for help

Ask the other person for help: e.g. 'What do you call...?

(Ellis 1985: 184-5)

Task 7.1

Here is an extract from a Danish student's story about an accident, based on a set of pictures:

They are carrying a man - in ahm - erm - in a portable bed - the one that the hospitals use to carry people that got an accident - and they're taking him - ah from the road - he was on the road - ok but they have just come because - a man - has called the police - I mean the people in charge of looking after people that have had accidents.

(Bygate 1987: 46)

What was the English word he was looking for when he said **portable bed?**What did he mean by **the people in charge of looking after people that have had accidents?**

Which of the Communication Strategies was he using in both cases?

To compare your answer with those in the Feedback, click here

Task 7.2

For this task you will need to have a partner you can speak to in English. (If you don't have someone you can work with face to face, you could use web software such as Voxapop at http://www.voxopop.com/

Think of something special or unique about the culture of your region. It could be a sport, or a dish, or a piece of clothing, and so on. It is important that your partner is not familiar with the things you have chosen, because that means they will have to make an effort to understand you.

Describe it to your partner in English. When you find it difficult to find the right words, use a communication strategy.

Conversational repair

A different sort of problem can occur when you are talking to someone and you use a word which they do not know or understand. The term covering the various ways in which this sort or difficulty can be resolved is *conversational repair*.

Again, we may need to use this sort of repair in own language, too. In fact, our next example involved two native speakers of English: A, an American woman visiting Edinburgh, and S, a local resident. A had asked S for advice on where she could go for a cycle ride.

To understand the problem, you need to know that *cobbles* (or *cobblestones*) is the name for the squared stones that you see in the older streets in Edinburgh, such as the Royal Mile.

Task 7.3

Read the conversation. What was the misunderstanding over the underlined question?

- A: What about going down by the Firth of Forth?
- **S**: That should be fun, shouldn't it? Yes, you could. You can ride right along the edge, you know, without having to keep to the main road. That should be great, actually. You could do that.
- A: Is it very rough down there, though?
- **S**: Well, there are no cobbles as far as I can remember. Have you tried riding on the cobbles?
- **A:** No, but I was thinking rather more... rough in terms of the people.
- S: Oh I see. Well, I don't think so. I don't know. Parts of it are quite poor, particularly the Pilton area.

(adapted from Brown and Yule 1983: 93)

To check your answer in the Feedback, click here

What the Scottish woman did was **reformulate** (rephrase) what she has said, to make her meaning clearer. That is one possible repair strategy; others are shown below.

- Confirmation check e.g. 'So he didn't win, then?'
 Listener makes sure they've understood what Speaker means
- Comprehension check— e.g. 'Do you follow me?', or 'Ok?'
 Speaker makes sure that Listener has understood
- Clarification request e.g. 'When you say <u>so-so</u>, what do you mean?', 'Pardon?'
 Listener asks Speaker to repeat, explain or rephrase
- Repetition

Listener or Speaker repeats their own (or the other's) words

- **Reformulation** e.g. 'So-so in other words, not very good' Speaker rephrases the content of what they have said
- Completion

Listener completes Speaker's utterance

Backtracking

Speaker returns to a point in the conversation, up to which they believe that Listener has understood

Task 7.4

Below is part of a conversation between three international students: Isabel (Spanish), Yuko (Japanese) and Khalid (Malaysia). Isabel is talking about Seville, her home city. Notice how all three students carry out conversational repairs, when they feel they need to. The repairs are shown in bold.

Can you identify which repair strategy is being used (from the list above) in each case?

Isabel I was telling one of my friends + 'yeah we have all the streets full of orange trees' and + he asked me + 'but don't you eat the oranges?' + and I said 'no they're very bitter it's impossible they're + really bitter' and +

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it must be wild one + + wild orange tree? + + + wild?
Yuko
Khalid huh?
Isabel wild?
Yuko
       yes so nobody tries to eat them + the oranges from + uh +
Isabel the street?
Yuko
       the street yes
Isabel no no + but do you know why do you use that orange for?
Yuko
       for marmalade
Khalid what?
Yuko
       marmalade + sweet sort of jam
Isabel yeah but for the + + queens of England but not for us + we don't use it at home
+ + just to threw to each other
Khalid threw?
Yuko
       (laughs)
Isabel yeah it's true + at Christmas I was having a party with my friend + + just a dinner
very guiet + and suddenly + + we went in the + balcony
Khalid hmhm
Isabel and somebody throw at us an orange
Yuko
       hah!
Isabel it went (makes sound effect) POOSH! to the wall
Khalid is that traditional way to + + celebrate something or what?
Isabel no
Khalid just to + + annoy
Isabel to bother us
         (laughter)
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To check your answer in the Feedback, click here

There is nothing unusual about that conversation. It simply illustrates how the partners in a conversation can help each other out when a communication problem arises.

When you have the chance to talk informally with others in English, you should expect to do this sort of repair work. Don't expect to speak with complete accuracy or with total fluency. Nobody does. Native speakers hesitate and make slips, too. This brings us to Language Learning Principle 11, which is

Keep the conversation going

Remember that, as a second language user of English, you can also **learn** from the points in a conversation that need repair.

To do that, you need to identify what caused the problem:

- If it was something that <u>you</u> said, do you know exactly why it was a problem for the others?
- If you aren't sure what the problem was, you can always ask the other people what they thought you said. In that way you can get an impression of how your English sounds to people listening to you.

RESOURCES

Audio recorder

A digital audio recorder is an excellent resource for getting more familiar with spoken English. It enables you not only to listen again to other speakers, but also to record yourself speaking English.

One suggestion for recording yourself is to use the recorder like a diary. Fix a regular time each evening to spend a few minutes talking about the events of your day. It works best if you imagine you are talking to one particular person, rather than to the microphone. Don't prepare in advance what you are going to say.

When you have finished, replay and listen to the recording, stopping at any parts where you had pronunciation difficulties or couldn't find the exact word. Re-record them.

For further suggestions on audio-recording, see the **Advice** section (below).

Task 7.5

Which would be better - an audio diary or a video diary?

When you have thought about that, watch this video

http://www.fluentin3months.com/video-diaries/

Television / DVD

TV and video enable you to exploit the visual element that is essential in face-to-face communication. One way to use the visual dimension of conversation is to watch TV programmes involving a group of people in discussion. If you are based in the UK, good examples are *Channel 4 News* (7 pm weekdays), *Newsnight* (BBC2 10.30 pm weekdays), *Question Time* (BBC1, 10.35 pm Thursdays). Look out for things such as the ways in which the speakers indicate that they want to speak next, or are about to finish what they are saying. Recognising these 'turntaking' signals will help you to participate in English conversations.

Recording spoken English in this way enables you to collect reallife examples of how people speak that may be much more useful to you than commercial listening materials. Your own recorded data will put you in a position to apply Language Learning Principle 11:

Learn some lines as wholes

The 'lines' in this case are **phrases and expressions** that you notice people using and which you can absorb into your own English. Use them as you hear them being used, not as separate words but as whole 'formulae'.

The examples below (from Cook 1989: 118) are some of the expressions you will hear British people using in a variety of speaking situations:

Opening: Hello there; Hi; How are you?; How's things?

Taking a turn: Yes but; Well yes but; Surely...

Holding a turn: er; um; anyway; you know; I mean; sort of

Passing a turn: What do you think?; tag questions

Closing: Right; well anyway; so; ok then

There are many more, of course. **Opening expressions** are used to introduce particular types of talk. McCarthy (1991: 139) provides these openers to anecdotes and jokes:

I'll always remember the time when...

Did I ever tell you about...

Did I ever tell you the one about...

Then there was the time...

I must tell you about...

Have you heard the one about...

You'll never guess what happened yesterday...

I heard a good one the other day...

Then there's the one about...

Other people

It may seem strange to include other people under 'resources', but many international says that informal conversation has been a key source of language improvement for them. You may remember that in the Preparation unit we saw that students taking a full-time pre-sessional English course estimated that about 30% of their improvement was due to social conversation.

Task 7.6

From the language learning point of view, do you think it would be better to talk informally to a group of (a) British students, (b) non-native speakers, or (c) both natives and non-natives? Why?

To check your answer in the Feedback, click here

ADVICE FROM OTHER STUDENTS

The message of this final section in PROFILE can be summed up as Language Learning Principle 12:

Make the most of your opportunities

In this unit in particular, we have stressed how important it is to actively look for chances to practise your spoken English, to record and analyse the language that people use in informal talk, as opposed to writing.

This section is based on the experiences of international students at Edinburgh who made a conscious effort to improve their speaking ability in English. In this case, each one is followed by suggestions for action, linked with what the student told us.

Student 1. I used to talk aloud to myself to prepare for a seminar. I used to do it at least twice - once aloud and once quietly. Sometimes

if you are thinking you may have to stop and think of a word, so I practise to make myself more fluent. I don't worry about pronunciation, except of some key terms.

It is a common experience that when speaking another language we are aware of **greater time pressure** than when talking our own language. By the time we have worked out what we wanted to say, the conversation may have moved on, making our comment no longer relevant.

One way to practise speaking under time pressure is called **4-3-2**.

4-3-2

- 1. Find a text (e.g. a newspaper article). Read it and make notes, on a separate piece of paper, of the main points. Put the article away, but keep your notes.
- 2. Record yourself giving an oral summary based on your notes. Allow yourself **four** minutes.
- 3. Replay and listen; monitor your performance are there any words you need to look at again in the article? Do you need to check their pronunciation (sound and stress) in the dictionary? If so, do that.
- 4. Rewind. Make a second recording, but this time give yourself **only three** minutes.
- 5. Repeat Step 3.
- 6. Make a final recording, summarising the text in **two** minutes.

Task 7.7

Now do 4-3-2 for yourself, following the six steps in the box.

The 4-3-2 technique is of course very artificial, but it has the advantage of making you think about what is essential and getting the maximum information into the shortest time.

Student 2. I try to express myself clearly by talking with British people. But in many cases I cannot make myself understood because of my wrong spoken English. Sometimes I find I have to think for a while to choose words. However if I speak more, I feel more confident.

Student 2 has also found that conversation helps him progress because it is a way of raising his level of confidence. One problem, though, is that British people are unwilling to correct international students in informal conversation, for social reasons: in English, if you openly correct someone in informal conversation, you risk being considered arrogant and aggressive.

So this is a practical obstacle if you are an international student wanting correction. You need negative feedback, to make faster progress, but how can you get that feedback if you do not have access to an English teacher willing to correct you? One possibility is: ask the listeners what they thought you said.

When we have said something that is not understood, our natural reaction is to repeat or rephrase what we have said, so that the listener can understand us. **Asking the person to tell you what it was they thought you said** will give you a 'picture' of what your English sounds like to other people.

A second tactic for learning from conversation is to listen carefully to what the other people in the conversation say when they are trying to understand a word you have pronounced differently from them. We have an example of that in Task 7.8.

Task 7.8

The extract below shows four international students doing a classroom speaking task. Aki and Hiro are Japanese, Manuel is from Spain, and Jon comes from the Faroe Islands. What might Hiro **learn about his own pronunciation** by listening to the other students' responses?

Hiro: yes + the Queen + Queen Elizabeth

Manuel: Queen Elizabeth

Hiro: is the largest passenger + largest passenger

Jon: the Queen is the largest passenger?

Manuel: passenger?

Hiro: the Queen Elizabeth second

Aki: hm?

Hiro: sorry + I mistook + Queen Elizabeth the second

Aki: hmhm

Manuel: it's the second?

Hiro: is the largest passenger in the

Manuel: in the?
Hiro: in the world
Aki: yeah in the
Hiro: in the?

Jon: in the boat?

Hiro: in the world

Manuel: in the bar?

Hiro: world

Manuel: in the?

Hiro: world

Jon: oh + in the w-o-r-l-d (stretching the vowel)

Hiro: in the world yes

Manuel: **oh w-o-r-l-d**

(Lynch 1996: 114)

To check your answer in the Feedback, click here

Tutorials

For many students the main speaking problem in the early part of their studies is not taking part in everyday conversations, but participating in their course tutorials and group discussions, especially if most of the other people on their programme are native speakers. It you are doing a distance learning programme, you may need to take part in on-line video discussions, which can be tricky, too.

Here are comments from a Japanese student:

Student 3. Discussion in tutorials or with supervisors is different from giving a presentation. I listen to <u>dialogues</u> in my subject, for example, Brian Magee's 'Men of Ideas', which is the recording of the BBC series, in order to improve in academic discussion.

His experience shows us again that there is not a single, uniform activity called 'speaking'. As we said at the start of this unit, speaking takes many forms, which make different demands on areas of knowledge and skill.

Student 3 has found it more difficult to participate in tutorials and supervision than to give a presentation to an audience. His solution has been to locate recorded material <u>similar</u> to discussions in his department.

No English teaching materials or broadcast recordings can replicate *precisely* what tutorials are like in your particular department, so if you want to practise with realistic data, you need to make your own recordings.

Here is how you could do that:

Analysing a tutorial

- 1. Before you record a tutorial, **ask permission**. Talk first to the tutor responsible. Explain why you want to make the recording. S/he may say that the other students could object; in this case, you could ask him/her to ask the students about it, rather than asking them yourself.
- 2. On the day of the tutorial, make sure you put your recorder in place **before the tutorial is due to start**. Avoid delaying the start. (Also, if the other students see you setting it up, they may feel uneasy or nervous about it).
- 3. When you are recording, **take part** in the discussion. Don't simply play the role of the sound engineer! You are still expected to be an active participant.
- 4. After the recording, decide what it is you want **to focus on**. In this unit, we looked earlier at ways that people <u>begin their speaking turns</u>. Do they actually use an explicit opening like 'I'd like to say...', or 'I want to make a point here'? Probably not; you will almost certainly find that the expressions people use are less formal than that just 'But'. 'In my opinion' is a favourite opener among learners of English, but it is rarely used by native speakers in academic discussions.

Websites

We think the best way to practice speaking is with another live human being, face to face.

But if you don't have that opportunity, the next best option may be to use a website like Voxopop:

http://www.voxopop.com/group/fca38b18-2f2d-4748-8544-1f7a97860fba

There you can set up a talk group with other students, record yourself discussing a topic, and invite the others to contribute by adding their recordings.

You can also use it as a platform for getting others' comments on a presentation.

For advice on **giving an academic presentation**, you will find a good selection at: http://www.uefap.com/speaking/spkfram.htm

- <u>Designing Effective Oral Presentations</u> (from Rice University, Houston, Texas)
- Giving Oral Presentations (from University of Canberra, Australia)
- Key Steps to an Effective Presentation (Academic speaking practice)
- <u>Preparing an Oral Presentation</u> (Tutorial on preparing effective presentations)
- <u>Tips for Giving Scientific Presentations</u> (Resource for scientific presentations)
- The Oral Presentation Skills Site (University of Hong Kong)

That completes this unit on Speaking. In the final unit of *EEL* we will be looking at Pronunciation.

As always, if you have found any *errors* in this unit on Speaking, or any web links which no longer work, or if you have other informal learning techniques to tell me about, feel free to email me at A.J.Lynch@ed.ac.uk

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Speaking: Study notes and answers

Task 7.1

The first word the Danish speaker did not manage to remember (or did not know) was **stretcher**. The second was **paramedics** or **ambulance crew**. In both cases he used paraphrase to resolve the problem.

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Task 7.2 is an open question

To go back to the page you were on, click here

Task 7.3

The Scot understood that the American meant that the road by the Firth of Forth is 'rough' (= uneven to cycle on); in fact, S was asking whether the local people were 'rough' (= unfriendly, aggressive).

To go back to the page you were on, click here

Task 7.4

The various types of adjustment are shown in bold below.

Isabel I was telling one of my friends + 'yeah we have all the streets full of orange trees' and + he asked me + 'but don't you eat the oranges?' + and I said 'no they're very bitter it's impossible they're + really bitter' and +

Yuko it must be wild one + + wild orange tree? + + + wild? [repetition; comprehension check]

Khalid huh? [clarification request]

Isabel wild? [repetition]

Yuko yes so nobody tries to eat them + the oranges from + uh +

Isabel the street? [completion]

Yuko the street yes

Isabel no no + but do you know why do you use that orange for?

Yuko for marmalade

Khalid what? [clarification request]

Yuko marmalade + sweet sort of jam [repetition; reformulation]

Isabel yeah but for the + + queens of England but not for us + we don't use it at home + + just to threw to each other

Khalid threw? [repetition / clarification request]

Yuko (laughs)

Isabel yeah it's true + at Christmas I was having a party with my friend + + just a dinner very quiet + and suddenly + + we went in the + balcony

Khalid hmhm

Isabel and somebody throw at us an orange

Yuko hah!

Isabel it went (makes sound effect) POOSH! to the wall

Khalid is that traditional way to + + celebrate something or what? [confirmation check]

Isabel no

Khalid just to + + annoy [confirmation check]

Isabel to bother us (laughter)

To go back to the page you were on, click here

Task 7.5

This is an open question, but you can compare your views with the learner of Italian in the web video.

To go back to the page you were on, click here

Task 7.6

If you are with a group of British students, you may find that they speak too quickly for you to find them 'comfortably intelligible'.

Some international students assume that there is little benefit (and, actually, a disadvantage) in practising English with other non-native

speakers, but in fact there is some research evidence which contradicts that view:

research on university-level students of English L2 at work in small groups or pairs has revealed as rare learners' incorporation of other learners' errors into their own production. Far more prevalent have been learners' modification and manipulation of their initial utterances into more complex forms, self-generated adjustments toward more correct production and their incorporation of each other's correct productions into their own subsequent utterances.

(abridged from Pica 1994: 62)

So perhaps the best opportunities for learning come from conversation with a <u>mixed group</u> of native and non-native speakers of English. This provides you with practice in understanding spontaneous native speakers' speech, as well as the opportunity to adopt communication strategies and conversational repair when necessary.

To go back to the page you were on, click here

Task 7.7

You will find our answers to this problem as Technique 1 and 2.

To go back to the page you were on, click here

Task 7.8

If Hiro had been listening *really* carefully, he could have noticed that the others thought he was saying **boat** and **bar**. That should have shown him that his <u>w</u> must sound to the other students like a **B**, and that they had heard his vowel in 'world' as **oh** or **ah**, instead of what it should sound like, which is the same vowel sound as *bird*, and *first*, and *learn*.

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