

TOWARDS BETTER SPEAKING IN ENGLISH MAJOR CLASSES: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACH

Zaidan Ali Jassem and Jassem Ali Jassem

International Islamic University

University Malaya

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the different ways of speaking that people utilize in their interactions and the relevance of these to the foreign and/or second English major classroom. The data of the research is drawn from English major students at the International Islamic University, Malaysia. It has been observed that, although these students are generally capable of handling conversations of a non-academic nature in non-academic settings fairly easily and fluently, they are restricted when it comes to discussing academic topics in a formal setting. The paper explains why this happens and suggests that speaking about academic topics requires special skills and training. This paper outlines strategies to encourage students to interact and speak naturally, confidently, and academically. This can best be achieved the paper argues, by using a sociolinguistic-cum-integrative approach. The former is based on the notion of speaking style and the latter on the four language skills. The approach can be applied to other foreign, second and first language settings.

Introduction

Speaking is one of the four basic language skills, the others being listening, speaking, reading and writing. Judging by the various approaches that try to describe, analyze and teach it, speaking means talking, communication, conversation and discourse. Speaking is a linguistic activity which, like language itself, consists of several elements, which include: sounds (pronunciation), words and their parts (morphology and lexis/semantics), structure (grammar and syntax), conversation and utterances (discourse), usage and its rules (discourse/pragmatics/semantics), fluency (ease of speech, confidence, coherence, speed), and topicality (themes and ideas).

Describing speaking means including all or one or more of the above elements. And so teaching speaking involves dealing with all or one or more of the above. Nonetheless, no single study can handle all these elements, however ambitious it may aspire to be. In this research, we will attack the development or improvement of speaking with a focus on topicality and discursality.

Sociolinguistic Analyses of Speaking: A Survey

Sociolinguists have contributed a great deal to the analysis of speech and ways of speaking. Their analyses and methods may help teachers to teach speaking skills more effectively. Sociolinguists divide speech into different types, which they call style, genre, register, etc. Furthermore, speaking styles can be based on natural conversations or on readings of passages, words or lists. Sociolinguists often differentiate the following styles:

1. **Casual/spontaneous style:** This includes conversations between friends and neighbours on "homely" topics and affairs. Such style is intimate and friendly and speakers use the vernacular substantially.
2. **Careful/formal style:** This includes conversations between strangers on serious topics and matters as in job interviews, academic discussions, lectures and debates. In this style, which is a formal and official one, speakers favour the standard.
3. **Reading style:** This includes a number of styles such as reading a passage, a word list or sets of two words. The standard dialect predominates in these styles.
4. **Topic style:** Some topics such as a cooking, swimming, hobbies require casual speech while others such as debating the future of education; lecturing on medicine and science; etc. call for formal style. The usage of the standard and the vernacular varies with topic.
5. **Addressee style:** Speakers change their way of speaking depending on who their listener may be: immigrant to local, immigrant to co-immigrant; teacher to teacher; teacher to student; student to student; husband to wife; father to children; etc. The variety of language used depends on the social backgrounds of the speaker and the listener. (See Jassem 1993a).

All speakers, native and non-native, exhibit different levels of competence and fluency in interactions involving such dimensions or styles. Informal topics generally require no big effort on the part of the speakers. Further, from the viewpoint of academic assessment, fluency in such areas is not important since all teachers do not test their students on how to cook and wash.

However, speaking seriously - i.e., expressing ideas of an academic nature - is what matters most to lecturers. The ability to think, analyze, respond and argue logically and convincingly is what is needed and pursued. How can academically serious discourse be developed in students?

The Problem: Why Students don't Speak

A Malay academician commented once that while "Arab students are talkers; Malaysians are silent as this is our culture." My own experience at IIUM shows that students tend to be generally silent in classes; they tend to be polite.

Investigating the Problem: Initial Results

What do the students themselves say about this? A good number of Malay students agree that Malay culture tends towards silence as a mark of politeness and deference. To find out more about this, a questionnaire was given in July-October 1995 to two batches of third (No. = 25) and fourth (No. = 14) year students (Total = 39), taking the courses: *ENGL 3050 Sociolinguistics and ENGL 4050 New Varieties of English*. The questionnaire was divided into a number of sections: (i) lecturer, (ii) subject, (iii) test, (iv) teaching method: (a) lecture, (b) tutorial, (c) workshop, (d) seminar and (v)

other comments. Here are some of their comments which are taken from the "other comments" section of the questionnaire.

1. "I sometimes don't talk in class because in sociolinguistics class, I'd prefer to listen attentively to the lectures from the lecturer and I value the lectures so much."
2. "Sometimes I think it is not necessary to talk during lectures. I prefer to consult my lecturer afterwards if I face any difficulty during lectures. This is because I prefer to ask my friends and revise the textbooks first."
3. "I want to concentrate on what you're saying."
4. "I'm sleepy."
1. "Sometimes I remain silent because I need to concentrate on the subjects/topics taught."

Other students wrote at greater length.

Zarina Zahri writes:

Why do we keep silent in English medium class? There are many reasons behind this particular problem but the major reason is inferiority complex in the usage of the English language.

I have a friend who is very intelligent but has a very passive attitude in classroom. I often provoke her to answer questions or at least give her point of view in class, but she shyly said that she does not want to make a fool of herself by using incorrect English, not the incorrect answers!! Another reason, I believe, is culture. Malay culture value silent as a good act. We must therefore remain silent when elderly are speaking or in any situation where older people are involved. Probably, the silent problem is due to this or may be it is a pure simple reason, I don't know.

Mazni bt Mustapha claims:

In the context of Malaysian English, silence indicates many hidden meaning. As in my culture being silence while a teacher is teaching is a way showing respect. Many of the Malaysian students keep silence at most of the time because they are listening attentively to the teachers.

In some cases, some Malaysian students restrain themselves from voicing out their opinions or asking any question in the middle of their lecture. One of the reason is that they are afraid to interrupt the ongoing class. Interruption in class can be annoying to some students in class as well as to some teachers. This is because interruption can delay the lessons that are being taught. Therefore, these students prefer to keep quite and wait until the end of the class when they want to inquire anything about their lessons from their teachers.

Another obvious reason to why Malaysian students keep silence during their English medium lesson is because they don't have confidence to speak up in English. They are embarrassed to speak "broken" English in public. Therefore, this language barrier leads to a communication breakdown between the teachers and the students. As a whole, silence in Malaysian English carries both positive and negative values. However, be it positive or negative, silence is still much depended on an individual's social background.

Roslina Manaf states:

In Malaysia I think silence is valued in the society. Girls especially are expected to keep silence most of the time. Being noisy and argumentative are considered rude and unattractive. 'Good girls' always kept silent. Then there are the religious factor when one has to keep silent during lecture or azan. However, concerning some complaint made by a few lecturers that Malaysian students are passive I have to disagree. Personally, I am very active in class and I think students will talk more in class if they're familiar with the subject and the lecturer. I notice I speak more freely in BENL classes because I know the subjects

and the lecturer but I am quite passive in IRKH classes because I am not very familiar with the subject and I'm afraid I would say something blasphemous.

Apart from that I think if the lecturer conducts a seminar or workshop I think the student will talk more because they no longer feel the tensions of formal classroom teachings.

To sum up, there are lots of reasons as to why students don't talk in class: cultural, situational, topical, and methodological. All such factors may encourage or inhibit students' speaking. Certain cultures discourage juniors from talking in front of seniors. The nature of the topic may be another problem; most topics are difficult to comprehend. Student-teacher relationship is a major factor as not all teachers are student-friendly. The style of teaching is another reason as different teaching methods receive different responses from the students.

The analysis of the questionnaire data has shown that the students were generally happy with their lecturer; they had no problems with his accent or language; the lectures were interesting, informative, and up-to-date and the tests were fair and just. However, the lecture was not suitable for developing students' speaking skills because it is teacher-controlled and topic-centred.

The tutorial, workshop and seminar gave the students the freedom and the time to talk. All these students indicated that they spoke considerably during these sessions. Thus, students do and can talk if teachers using the right methods and tools prepare and motivate them to do so.

In the rest of this paper, the researchers will outline the steps taken to develop speaking through the seminar method of teaching.

The Remedy

Seminars and workshops do encourage students to take the initiative and talk. The seminar can be defined as an academic or study gathering in which a student or a group of students present, describe and discuss their project or written assignment in class.

Purpose of Seminars

The seminars have a number of aims, namely to:

1. re-inforce the lectures. They are used as a follow-up, a back-up and support to lecture topics and to facilitate understanding with a hands-on experience.
2. exchange ideas freely;
3. explore new dimensions such as finding out the limitations of certain ideas;
4. train the students in speaking and public speaking.

The last point is an important one as it explicitly addresses speaking per se. Speaking can best be developed, following these steps.

- a. Understanding of lecture topic: No speaking is possible without coming to grips with the topic at hand.
- b. Applying the topic to a local scene: This involves asking students to find out, to test, and to solve a problem;
- c. Team-up and cooperation: Students need to discuss matters with classmates;
- d. Write-up: Students must present well-written work;
- e. Presentation: Each student must deliver his work orally in front of the whole class. He may have to answer questions from other students on his work.
- f. Commentator/Discussant: Each presenter before the presentation may be assigned a discussant.

An Exemplary Seminar

This shows how one seminar progressed from the beginning to the end. The seminar was conducted for and by third year English major students, taking the course ENGL 3050 Sociolinguistics, in Semester II, 1996/97. The students have received instruction about the English dialects of England, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand for about 3 hours a week for four weeks. Using maps, dialects and their areas were described, grouped and identified on the basis of phonetic, grammatical and lexical features. The lecturer used a number of references, notably: Peter Trudgill (1994) *Dialects of England* and A. C. Wells (1980) *Accents of English*. The students not only enjoyed these lectures but asked their teacher who originally wanted to cover only the dialects of England for more.

Task Description

After the completion of the first 3 hours of lectures on the phonetic features of traditional and modern English dialects, the lecturer asked his students if they could do a similar description of the geographical distribution of the dialects of Bahasa Malaysia in Peninsular Malaysia. The students (No. = 39) were asked to work in groups of up to 8 individuals. The groups varied in number between 5-8, although there was one group of only two.

When grammatical and lexical features of the dialects of England were covered over the next week of lectures, the students were asked to incorporate them. Each group of students was told not to examine more than 5 features. Thus there were groups which described certain regional Bahasa Malaysia dialects, using all three features; some only grammatical features and some only phonetic features.

Task Execution

The students finished their task in 10 days. They collected their data from real situations or people. They were requested not to depend on any written sources at all. When the students submitted their written group assignments of about five pages each, they were corrected and returned for further

corrections and modifications, if any. All groups did the specified task successfully and correctly except for one all-male group, who were re-directed and helped.

Task Presentation and Discussion

Then three weeks later, there was a seminar. The students were told that every group member must present his part of the work; otherwise, they would lose marks. They were told to co-operate and co-ordinate their work in the best manner possible. During the seminar, the progress was as follows:

- i. The lecturer took control of the whole class as regards time management, turn distribution and discipline maintenance.
- ii. The lecturer wrote the title of the seminar on the board:
Seminar: Towards a Dialect Geography of Bahasa Malaysia.
- iii. The lecturer requested the students to split into groups and to be seated in a circular fashion.
- iv. The lecturer asked each group to select a co-ordinator who would act as the compere of that group as far as presentation was concerned. Then the groups were asked to discuss and plan their strategy in five minutes.
- v. The lecturer informed the groups that each student would be given roughly two minutes to present his/her turn.
- vi. The lecturer requested the students to listen attentively and take notes and to ask questions at the end of each group's turn.

Then the groups started to present. We started with the smaller groups first and ended with the largest. Each group's emcee had the duty of assigning the order and sequence of the speakers of his group. The presentations progressed very smoothly and ended on schedule. Every single member of each group spoke except for one girl of the two-girl-strong group although she did manual work in the presentation, by holding and showing the audience the maps while her mate explained the the dialects they examined.

The students presented their work in order and with confidence and joy. The most interesting presentation, was performed by the 10-boy-strong group, who presented last. They were well-informed, dynamic, jovial and fun to listen to.

There was little room for questions. Not more than one or two questions could be posed because of time constraints. Several students asked certain questions which either needed clarification or challenged what the speakers had said. I noted two or three interesting things in this respect:

- i. Some student listeners asked very interesting questions. These students have great potential.
- ii. The queries were entertained either individually or in consultation with other members of the group.
- iii. The lecturer intervened when that was deemed fit.

Each group's closing was marked by a round of clapping. Finally, the whole class was given a strong round of applause for successfully finishing their task.

To conclude, the lecturer summarized all the discussions by the various groups and praised their achievements. He asked the students to add further comments to their work such as the concise history, expansion and retreat of the dialects examined. They were also asked to keep the assignments in order to develop their work on the basis of new instruction and new ideas.

Reactions to the Seminar

Why did the students enjoy such seminars? Why did they accomplish the task with confidence? Why were they communicative? How could they finish their task within two minutes?

There are two reasons: one relates to method and the other relates to the overall procedure, which is sociolinguistic-cum-integrative. As to method, this is because seminars are more suitable for students to speak as they do not strip them of their independence. To speak on academic topics, you need to be well-prepared and not taken off-guard.

As for the overall procedure, the following points may be noted:-

- a. The students understood the lectures well and consequently they applied the ideas successfully.
- b. The students co-operated with each other. They discussed the issue and helped one another.
- c. The students liked what they were doing. They enjoyed it greatly. For example, I asked them to choose one or two features. Most described more than five features.
- d. The students were familiar with what they were doing. First, they knew the theory of rural dialectology and its application to several English settings. Secondly, they were also familiar with the languages and dialects of their country: Malaysia.
- e. The students combined many skills in the completion of this task: listening to lectures, peer group discussion, interacting with teacher, collecting data, writing the task, and speaking about the task. In other words, an integrative approach has been followed throughout the whole task from its conception to completion.

Conclusion and Implications

Students can speak academically, effectively, informatively, confidently and joyfully if they:

1. understand the background of their topic;
2. like the topic; and can apply it to a local area;
3. team up with friends;
4. are familiar with the topic;

5. receive good advice and encouragement;
6. read and write or write, read and speak; and
7. discuss and appreciate the value of the topic.

These steps combine sociolinguistic and integrative approaches together. This is the best way for the development of speaking about academic topics in a formal style.

This work has further implications and can be used to develop speaking skills in other areas and topics. Researchers can use it as a general guide which they may modify to serve their purpose. One such method is to require every student in the class to prepare a question for the speaker. But this may be impossible as it means that every speaker will have to listen to and answer too many questions. In a class of 40 students, this would mean 1,600 questions. A simpler, more economical way would be to assign a discussant for each speaker in advance, and the speaker will need to give a copy of his assignment to his discussant at least one day before the presentation. The discussant will read it thoroughly and prepare his evaluation and comments accordingly, provided this does not exceed one written page and a two-minute-long discussion. Being a discussant thus forces every one to participate. This last technique may be better suited to students who work independently and not as teams.

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