

# Teaching and Testing Spoken English

(A Summary of the talk given by Professor Peter Strevens of the University of Essex)

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This topic refers to the whole question of what one is doing in teaching English and a whole set of technical, psychological and statistical problems concerning the construction and administration and validation of tests. But in his talk, at the British Council, Professor P. Strevens, Professor of Applied Linguistics in Essex University, concentrated on some of the basic features of teaching Spoken English and talked in a very practical way about some of the particular problems involved in testing Spoken English.

## General Principles of Teaching Spoken English

1. In teaching Spoken English it is important that we decide what our aims and objectives are. These should include the understanding of English as it is spoken, the speaking of it with adequate intelligibility as well as the reading and the writing of it.
2. Is the aim of reaching a suitable standard of Spoken English in the general school system realistic?
3. Having achieved the aims, we have to evaluate the degree of success achieved by both the pupils and teachers.
4. Ability in Spoken language depends totally on the pupils' experience of hearing it; the quality of experience received; the opportunities for practising it; the knowledge of when the errors occur. It is here that the teachers should act as a means of correcting,

sympathetically correcting, and of teaching the learners to know when their efforts are not quite right.

## Choice and Kind of Spoken English

The biggest choice is between two great families or kinds of English — the British Family and the American. The kind of English taught in Malaysia is more British based — whatever it is, teachers should be aware that American English is just like British English in terms of value, except that it is slightly different in pronunciation. As for the teacher's own pronunciation, whichever one he speaks, he should make sure that he and his pupils learn to understand the other.

Where the teaching of Spoken English is based on the grammatical patterns and vocabulary usage of Standard English, some feel that all learners should end up with the same accent as the native English speakers, while others feel that as long as the eventual result is reasonably intelligible to educated speakers, it is adequate. In any accent, in any pronunciation system, there is a lot of spare capacity to absorb change and unfamiliarity.

Besides intelligibility, word stress is important too. One of the most important causes of occasional difficulty in understanding is when a speaker of English puts the stress in a word on an unfamiliar syllable, on the syllable different from the one that it is normally put on. Some kind of rhythm and intonation pattern is also important.

Intelligibility is not only a matter of being able to articulate all the components of the language and to do so according to the patterns of the language but it is a matter of doing so with reasonable fluency and at a reasonable speed.

### Testing

It is important that we distinguish tests from examinations. Tests are measuring instruments. Examinations may or may not be measuring instruments. Testing means measuring performances. Examining means that the particular evaluation that goes on may be used for quite other administrative public purposes.

Testing Spoken English then presumably means measuring the candidates' ability to understand the language that is spoken and to speak it intelligibly. How do we test Spoken English? Professor Strevens gave a few suggestions:

- a) Keep clear in your minds the distinction between objective and subjective testing.
- b) Strike a happy balance between objectivity and subjectivity.

An example of a totally subjective oral test is the orthodox conventional oral conversation and comprehension. The drawback to subjective judgement of oral performance is that it is variable and the remedy to this would probably be multiple marking by experienced markers instead of by a single examiner.

Objective oral tests are nearly possible but very difficult. It is difficult to test, in a single test, all the features of comprehension and production of English. Therefore, it is reasonable to concentrate a good part of the test on particular points e.g. common errors and pronunciation.