

Teaching Communication and Interaction Strategies

An action research project with Greek teenagers at intermediate level*

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INTRODUCTION

The choice of this project was largely determined by the fact that very little attention had been given to fluency and student interaction during the previous years of tuition of the group of students concerned. As a result, students had developed inhibitions towards using the target language which had a negative impact on their oral performance. It would, therefore, be an opportunity and a challenge for me to examine the effectiveness of certain activities and techniques in helping students shed their inhibitions and become more fluent communicators.

1. OUTLINE

1.1. Aims

- To help students become more confident and fluent communicators and encourage risk-taking.
- To make students aware of certain communication strategies (Bygate 1987: Ch. 5; Ellis 1985: 180-188), notably achievement strategies (paraphrase and co-operative strategies) (Bygate 1987: 44-46, Ellis 1985: 184-185) and their importance in facilitating oral production, as well as to provide the students with opportunities to use them consciously.
- To make students aware of the reciprocal nature of oral interaction and certain features of "interaction routines" (Bygate 1987: 34-35).
- To elicit and present expressions through which the above strategies and features can be realised.
- To make students aware of the benefits of assuming joint responsibility for the negotiation of meaning.
- To provide opportunities for free practice in certain routine types of interaction, notably informal discussion and informal planning and decision making (see Bygate 1987: 35).

1.2. Procedure

- Lesson 1 dealt with the strategy of circumlocution.
- Lesson 2 dealt with the following aspects of oral interaction: signalling (lack of) understanding / interest / participation through asking for repetition / clarification / elaboration / confirmation.
- Lesson 3 dealt with time gaining devices, showing interest and participation through expressing and asking for opinions and ways of signposting a discussion.
- Lesson 4 dealt with ways of expressing agreement / disagreement (and their level of formality).
- Lesson 5 was a consolidation and awareness-raising lesson.
- Lesson 6 focused on helping students to become aware of strategies they (do not) use, and provided more opportunities for practising the strategy of circumlocution.

* This is the report of an action research project on oral communication and interaction strategies I conducted in February and March 1992, and submitted in April 1992 in partial fulfillment of the RSA/Cambridge Diploma for Overseas Teachers of English. It is reproduced here with minor changes in wording, reference conventions and the numbering of sections, with some footnotes incorporated in the text, and some extremely short sub-sections combined.

2. THE RELEVANT THEORY

2.1. Characteristics of Spoken Language

Apart from instances when listeners are unable or not expected to respond overtly (e.g. news broadcasts, lectures) speakers have to take the listeners' feedback into consideration, for instance they will have to rephrase their message or answer to questions. Bygate (1987: 34-35) mentions features of interaction routines involving feedback. The ones relevant to the aims of this project are: "asking the other person for information or language that he or she has forgotten", "asking the other person's opinion", "responding to requests for clarification from the listener(s), for instance by rephrasing, repeating, giving examples or analogies", "indicating uncertainty about comprehension", "indicating comprehension", "asking for clarification", "expressing appropriate agreement, reservations or appreciation of speaker's point", "interrupting where necessary to express any of the foregoing". Speakers will also have to take into account the listeners' knowledge of the world and/or of the particular topic of the interaction. This reciprocal nature of the interaction facilitates communication as both speaker and listener co-operate to ensure mutual understanding (Bygate 1987: 12-13). Speakers have also to decide on what they are to say next and how to express it while they are speaking. This fact may affect the structure of the speakers' utterance and the density of communicated information.

2.2. Functions of Spoken Language

Brown & Yule (1983a: 1-3; 1983b: 11-16) remark that language can be seen as having two functions: transferring information (transactional function) and establishing/maintaining social relationships (interactional function). Interactional spoken language is characterised by shifts of topic and short turns. The accuracy and clarity of information is not of primary importance, and facts/views are not normally questioned or challenged. In transactional spoken language longer turns are the norm and there is a clear topic. Since the effective transference of information is the goal, interlocutors are actively engaged in the negotiation of meaning. Brown & Yule summarise the above stating that whereas interactional language is "listener oriented", transactional language is "message oriented".

2.3. On Native Oral Production

As regards native oral production, one can distinguish some general features of the spoken language (as opposed to the written one). These features are the result of the speakers' efforts to facilitate their speaking production and/or the time constraints imposed on them by the nature of oral communication (Brown & Yule 1983a: 15-17; Brown & Yule 1983b: 4; Bygate 1987: 14-21; McCarthy 1991: 143-144).

- a. The syntax tends to be less complicated than in written language (Brown & Yule 1983b: 4). Speakers seem to favour *parataxis* (i.e. phrases linked not by subordination but by coordinating connectors ('and', 'or', 'but'), or phrases that are understood by the listener as being related to each other only by the way they are uttered by the speaker), and *ellipsis* (i.e. omission of elements of the sentence).
- b. Instances of "ungrammatical" utterances are common (if one considers the written medium to be the norm of grammatical correctness). McCarthy (1991: 143) provides an example: "There's another secretary too who I do not know what she's responsible for."
- c. Pauses, repetition and false starts are rather frequent.
- d. The use of "time-creating devices" ("filters", "pauses", "hesitations") (Bygate 1987: 18).

Based on these facts, Brown & Yule (1983b: 22 & 26) propose that it would be irrational and unnatural to expect the EFL learner to produce full, grammatically correct sentences when speaking.

2.4. What Is to Be Taught (Speaking in the EFL Classroom)

Although Brown & Yule (1983b) state that spoken language is primarily interactional, they go on to propose that what the EFL learner needs more is the teaching of “extended transactional turns” (op. cit.: 24), giving the following reasons:

- Long transactional turns can prove demanding even for native speakers.
- It is more often the case that the EFL learner needs L2 to communicate/acquire information.
- It is more feasible as far as methodology is concerned (op. cit.: 23-24 & 33).

McCarthy (1991: 137) argues that there is a bias in favour of transactional talk reflected in the design of materials/activities for the EFL classroom and proposes that the element of unpredictability which is inherent in interactional talk should be present in speaking and listening activities.

2.5. On Learner Strategies

Learners use communication strategies (Bygate, 1987: 42-48; Ellis, 1985: 180-185) in order to compensate for their imperfect mastery of the language when faced with a communicative need. Faerch & Kasper (1980 in Ellis 1985: 181) present them as being “potentially conscious” in the sense that learners may not always be conscious of the strategies they employ. Ellis adds that they can be “motivated” when learners become aware of the shortcomings of the linguistic means at their disposal. Ellis regards communication strategies to be the short-term solution to a problem, learning strategies being the long-term answer.

Communication strategies can be sub-categorised into achievement and reduction strategies. The first aim at communicating the whole message as perceived by the speaker. Examples of achievement strategies are: the use of L1 items, translation, paraphrasing, miming or pointing, eliciting/asking for help from interlocutor. The second aim at either communicating an imperfect message or communicating a message other than the one intended initially (a message that the speaker can manage to communicate).

3. CLASSROOM CONTEXT

3.1. School Facilities

A small private EFL school (English is the only language taught). There were enough tape recorders to record groups of three students separately during the activities. Unfortunately, other rooms were not always available and groups performed/recorded in the same room. As the room itself is quite small, there is considerable background noise in some of the recordings.

3.2. Methodology

In previous years the methodology was teacher-centred with a focus on accuracy. Grammar was considered of primary importance and was taught through a separate grammar book. Vocabulary teaching consisted mainly of memorisation of either synonyms or Greek ‘equivalents’. Writing lessons consisted of memorisation and writing of model compositions, combined with grammar and vocabulary exercises. For listening and reading, First-Certificate-type exercises were used. Speaking skills were not dealt with in any way (students were not expected to interact).

Learner-centred methods, skills development activities/tasks and group-work were introduced this year. The students responded rather well to the new (for them) teaching methods and by the time of the project they had come to regard pair/group work to be a matter of course.

3.3 Students

Age: 14-16 (Secondary School students).

Culture & Language: All students shared the same culture and L1 (Greek).

Level: Formally their level is Upper-intermediate. In the Greek EFL context this means that the students have been learning English for six to seven years. It is common practice in Greece for students to start learning English at the age of 8 to 10. After six to eight years of tuition, they normally sit the FCE exam. This class was expected to take the exam at the end of next year. In reality the students are of mixed ability, two students in particular would benefit more from an Intermediate class.

Attitude: On the whole they show interest. Nevertheless, since most of them come to classes right after school (schools in Greece work in morning or afternoon shifts) their concentration and ability to work are (understandably) not of high standards. Nevertheless, they seemed interested in the idea of a project on 'speaking' and they were involved during the project. The fact that the activities were recorded added a further element of interest and improved their participation (that is after the first shock had worn off).

4. THE PRE-TEST

4.1. The Activity

Students are presented with controversial statements characterising the 'good teacher'. The students are asked to decide on two they most agree with and two they most disagree with as (a) individuals, (b) groups of 3 or 4, (c) a class.

4.2. Some General Observations

- As a whole the discussion lacks natural flow and it is not easy for the listener to follow. Particularly in the case of group B it is not often clear whether the group came to an agreement, nor which the group's choices were.
- In several cases students do not adjust their responses according to their interlocutors' opinion and do not show intention to negotiate. For example, instead of responding to other students' views they just move on to express their own when their turn comes. In such instances the 'discussion' seems more like a series of monologues.
- They do not make any attempts to circumlocute in order to compensate for vocabulary shortcomings, and when they do try they are rarely successful.
- They seem to regard helping each other as inappropriate (in some instances they whisper when they do so).
- They do not seem to regard the negotiation of meaning as being a joint responsibility.
- They leave their utterances unfinished.
- They do not often signal (lack of) understanding/interest (few instances of asking for repetition/ clarification/confirmation).

4.3. The Feedback

The students were asked to fill in two questionnaires, and were involved in a class discussion on the pre-test activity and the questionnaires with the aim to:

- Record the students' reactions to the activity (e.g. problems).
- Indirectly raise the issue of certain strategies and to enquire about the students' views on their usefulness.
- Check the degree to which students were conscious of the strategies they used.

According to the students the two main sources of problems were lack of relevant vocabulary (78%) and lack of relevant “formulaic expressions” (67%) (Bygate 1987: 17). An interesting instance of inconsistency occurred when the students stated (during the feedback discussion) that they had not encountered any problems concerning lexical shortcomings. Lack of adequate grammar knowledge and lack of confidence followed in their ranking (44%). The students were aware of the reduction strategies they used (Bygate 1987: 47-48; Ellis 1985: 184-185). They did not seem aware of the lack of circumlocution on their part although they stated that they opt for Greek/silence as often as they try to circumlocute.

During the feedback discussion after Questionnaires I and II, it became clear that some students somehow understood the words ‘co-operation/help’ as meaning ‘correction’. Also some students thought that the teacher should intervene in a group’s discussion and help/correct a student ...

- *“If no one else can.”*
- *“Because each person will have a different opinion about his/ /em/ or if he’s stuck να πούμε (= so to speak, in Greek) /e/ he want to / / / /e/ he want to help in a different way // and the most /e/ correct /e/ way is /e/ you.”*

At that point I elicited the function of providing the interlocutor with the item he/she lacks or finishing his/her utterance:

T(teacher): “What do you show?”
P: “That you understand.”
T: “What else?”
AD: “That you care.”
T: “...and that you are ...?”
AD: “Interested.”

On circumlocution their opinions were mixed. Some examples:

- *“If you can.”*
- *“But sometimes it’s very difficult to find different words / to say something (S: Yes.) if you do not know the vocabulary / the right vocabulary.” S: “And then you have to say it in /e/ Greek.” N: “I do not agree / I think we know enough words to say something in different words.” AD: “If it’s very difficult?” P: “If it’s a subject that you do not know / words...” N: “You go on to say something else.” H: “Start again.”*
- *“You can’t find always words / more simple words to express it / I think you do not.” M: “I say it in a simple way from the beginning.”*

4.4. Rationale

Shortcomings of vocabulary and grammar were obviously encountered during the discussion. Nevertheless, it does not seem to be the case that remedial lessons on vocabulary/grammar would result in considerable improvement of the students’ oral production. It seems that students would benefit more from lessons focusing on communication strategies (Bygate 1987: 42-48; Ellis: 1985: 84 & 184) and negotiation skills (Bygate 1987: 47; Ellis: 1985: 184).

Also, since their efforts to employ production/achievement strategies (Bygate 1987: 44-46; Ellis: 1985: 184) were not always conscious or successful, remedial lessons aimed at improving the students’ fluency had best focus on production/achievement strategies and negotiation skills. Students can become aware of (and trained in) the use of certain production/achievement strategies. Furthermore, they can become aware of certain features of native speech (Brown & Yule 1983a: 15-17; Brown & Yule 1983b: 4; McCarthy 1991: 141-144). By integrating these two elements in their spoken production the students can become more confident and effective communicators.

5. THE DESIGN

5.1. Objectives & Content

The focus of the lessons was on oral communication, with the purpose of improving learners' confidence and fluency, as outlined in the aims. Students were led to awareness of certain communication strategies/skills as used by native speakers. Expressions through which these strategies/skills can be linguistically realised were elicited and presented.

5.2. Lesson Format

Lessons 2, 3, 4 and 6 began with a listening/awareness activity in which students were asked/led to identify instances of communication strategies/skills used, as well as their linguistic realisation. In Lesson 1, an adaptation of the "deep end" strategy (Johnson 1981: 192-193) was employed. Through the reports of students observing the language used by others carrying out an activity (describe and draw), and a feedback discussion between the "observers", the activity-participants and the teacher, the students were led to identify certain shortcomings of their production. In Lesson 5 the recording of an activity carried out in the first part of the lesson was used as data for the feedback task that followed. The benefits of employing the strategy/skill were discussed and further relevant expressions were elicited/presented. Students were given the opportunity to practice the strategy/skill in isolation before re-integrating it in the context of a "holistic" activity (Cook 1991: 82-83).

Most lessons generally follow a (somehow modified) 'presentation-practice-production' format. Cook (1991: 83-85) states that the use of atomistic activities "as an intermediate measure" can be justified on the grounds that teenagers/adults have the ability to "think and talk metalinguistically" (an ability that the teacher should exploit), provided that the isolated "levels of communication" be re-integrated. The lessons followed a cycle of isolation/examination and practice/re-integration.

5.3. Materials

The listening materials used consisted of either extracts from specially recorded tapes accompanying course-books and books on listening skills development, or students' recordings from previous lessons. In Lesson 1 (Activity 1) the extract used was an authentic BBC recording (Geddes, 1988). Since the level of difficulty proved to be above the listening competence of the students (resulting in initial frustration and the need to re-play the tape several times) taped material closer to the students' level had to be selected. Students' own recordings were used in order to either make students aware of the lack of use of certain communicative strategies/skills on their part, or make students conscious of the communicative strategies they did employ.

5.4. Activities/Tasks

Listening/Awareness Activities

Students were required to

- fill gaps in a given transcript of the listening text.
- indicate whether certain expressions/strategies were used by the speakers.
- identify the use of a strategy and note down its linguistic realisation.
- decide on the communicative meaning of certain phrases/expressions and note them down.

Regarding the "study of authentic conversations which are to be used as conversational models", Brown & Yule (1983b: 33) state that "the attention of students should be focused only on those elements that they are supposed to be paying attention to. They should be led to observe particularly important features... and, as soon as possible, put these observations to

use.” It seems reasonable that this principle could be transferred to the observation/awareness of the communication strategies/ skills employed by the interlocutors on tape.

Communication Activities

Students performed activities which involved:

- Describing and drawing.
 - Finding the difference between two partially identical pictures.
- Rixon & Byrne (1979) and Harmer (1983) (both cited in Bygate 1987: 78) refer to the above two activities as “communication games”.)
- Discussing ideas/views/opinions -notably students were engaged in activities in which they had to:
 - Choose from a list of (unalterable) given statements the ones they most agree/disagree with.
 - Choose from a list of given statements the ones they agree with and modify the remaining ones according to their opinion.
 - Rank a number of statements according to their beliefs/opinions.
 - Agree on and formulate statements expressing their views on a given subject and then discuss them in different groups (having to reformulate the ones they disagree on according to the second group’s opinion).

The activities listed were selected/adopted in order to provide the students with a context in which they could re-integrate the strategies/skills dealt with in each lesson, and to lead students to “become used to dealing with the kinds of unpredictable problems which reciprocal speech brings into (these) interaction situations” (notably informal discussion and informal planning/decision making) (Bygate 1987: 34-35). Bygate terms these activities as “two-way” and argues that they “generate more talk and more use of negotiation procedures” (op. cit.: 65).

Littlewood (1981) presents such activities as “functional communication activities” (“processing information” and “sharing and processing information”). He states that “the stimulus for communication comes from the need to discuss and evaluate (these) facts,” “... learners must, ... agree, justify and persuade in order to reach a common decision.” Rivers & Temperley (1978, in Bygate, 1987: 55) refer to such activities as “interaction activities” in which personal meaning can be conveyed.

Ur (1981: 11-17) states that in order for a discussion to be successful a purpose is needed. This purpose is manifested through a task which should involve “thinking”, “interaction”, “result” and “interest”. Also, Brown & Yule (1983b: 118) refer to task-based activities as creating “situations in which the speaker has to produce extended chunks of speech.” As regards **thinking** the students were asked to either form an opinion as individuals before the group discussion or to take part in a pre-discussion before they were re-grouped for the final stage. The **result** of the activity was the group decision recorded in the form of statements, choices among alternatives, or arguments formulated in order to persuade the members of the other group(s). Since the **result** was reaching a consensus (which would be recorded and/or used for the next stage of the discussion), or convincing the rest of the group of one’s choices/opinions, **interaction** was a prerequisite. As far as **interest** is concerned, the topics were based on the students’ stated personal interests (during an informal discussion at an earlier point of the course) and on the teacher’s observation that students were keen to participate in informal debates where they could express opinions.

Brown & Yule (1983b: 34-37) argue that an important element which affects the success of such activities is the “communicative stress” involved. According to them, increase of “communicative stress” may negatively affect the learners’ oral production. They suggest the following conditions relating to communicative stress:

- a. The level of familiarity of speaker/listener.
- b. The situation (environment).
- c. The relative level of L2 knowledge of the interlocutors.

- d. The information gap.
- e. The familiarity with the information held.
- f. The vocabulary needed.
- g. The structure of the task and of the information to be communicated.

In the particular situation, conditions (a), (b), (c) and (d) provided a rather low level of communicative stress as the students knew each other, were familiar with the classroom and shared almost the same level of L2 knowledge. Furthermore, the information (opinions/views) each speaker had to control was familiar to him/her and was not known by the listener (condition (e)). Regarding conditions (f) and (g), communicative stress was rather high for two reasons. First, relevant vocabulary was not pre-taught, so that students would be motivated to circumlocute and/or share vocabulary knowledge (the latter leading them to assume joint responsibility for communication). Second, students had not only to express but also to justify their choices/opinions. Nevertheless, since in most cases communicative stress was kept low, students were expected to perform adequately in re-integrating the strategies/skills and the aspects of interaction routines dealt with in each lesson.

5.5. Groupings

The activities were carried out by students in different groupings, not only as to the number of students in each group (which ranged from pairs to groups of 5), but also as to the individuals in each group. Students were given the opportunity to interact with everybody else in the class in the context of pairs/small groups on a number of occasions. On small groups, Bygate states that they provide “greater intensity of involvement”, that “learners spend more time negotiating and checking on meaning” and that “each group determines its own appropriate level of working” (1987: 96-97). The last statement provides a rationale for varying the individual students in which group (from lesson to lesson and/or from one step of an activity to the next). The staging of activities and the variation of individuals in each group was manipulated by the teacher, so that students were made familiar with a variety of paces/levels of working (which were dictated by the relative linguistic and communicative abilities of the students involved).

5.6. Roles of Students and Teacher

Regarding the content and aims of the project, although it was the teacher who made the final decision, the feedback from students through questionnaires and informal discussions were a helpful guideline. In the awareness/practice stages the teacher preferred (where possible) to guide/ elicit than to present and to facilitate student awareness. During communication activities students assumed joint responsibility for the success/failure of communication within their groups and exploited each other's knowledge/skills. Learner independence was also helped by the fact that in most cases different groups were in different rooms. The tape recorder substituted for the teacher as a ‘monitor’.

6. THE POST-TEST

6.1. Description

Like the pre-test, the post-test was a free activity where students had to reach a consensus. They were supposed to be a committee which had to decide on the most suitable person to receive an inheritance, having to choose between five claimants (activity adapted from Ur, 1981). They were given a hand-out containing information about the deceased and the claimants.

6.2. Procedure

In Stage 1 the students were divided into three groups ('Sub-committees' A, B and C). Since only seven students were present, they were grouped in two pairs and a group of three. These "sub-committees" had to come to a decision (which counted as one vote). They were also asked to note down their reasons for their choice. These notes would help them during Stage 2 in which students '1' and students '2' from each sub-committee formed new groups (in this case one group of 3 and one group of 4). The new groups had also to come to a decision (which also counted as a vote). Then the votes would be counted and in case of a tie a class discussion would be held and probably a final vote would be taken (which was the case).

An outline of the stages:

First Stage:

- Sub-committee A: Students A1 & A2
- Sub-committee B: Students B1, B2 & B3
- Sub-committee C: Students C1 & C2

Second Stage:

- Sub-committee 1: Students A1, B2, C1 & B3
- Sub-committee 2: Students A2, B2 & C2

6.3. Some Observations

The students found the topic of the activity very interesting. Discussions were lively, especially during Stage 2. The discussion of 'sub-committee 1', in particular, was rather lengthy and ended as an argument. It was very encouraging that although students were involved in a heated exchange, they kept arguing in English. In fact, a class discussion and a final vote were needed as students could not decide on one of the two shortlisted claimants. The instances of Greek during the class discussion were much more frequent as students became "too involved" in the activity (Ur, 1981). Since the need to communicate their ideas/views and to convince their interlocutor superseded the need to practice, the students (occasionally) opted for the use of their L1 as a more effective means of communication.

6.4. Drawbacks

In the lesson of the 'post-test' two students (Pandelis and Aris) were absent. Furthermore, a third student (Stacey) arrived late (when the three pairs had already started the activity). Therefore, it was impossible to duplicate the groups of the pre-test. Nevertheless, an effort was made to, at least, retain interaction between the same students as in the pre-test. Thus the pairs/groups were: Nick and Stavros (without Pandelis), Chris and Letta (without Haroula) and Adla and Stacey (with Haroula instead of Aris). This was the closest approximation of the "pre" grouping that was feasible under the circumstances.

Groups in Pre-Test		
Nick + Stavros + Pandelis	Adla + Stacey + Aris	Chris + Letta + Haroula
Groups in Post-Test		
Stage I		
Nick + Stavros	Adla + Haroula + Stacey	Chris + Letta
Stage II		
Nick + Adla + Stacey + Chris		Stavros + Letta + Haroula

7. DISCUSSION & EVALUATION

7.1. The Teacher's View (a first impression)

The aim of the project was to help students become more confident and successful communicators; that is to encourage students to take risks and interact during a discussion. It seems that this aim has been achieved. An observation of students' oral production during the post-test (compared to the one during the pre-test) shows improvement. The students sound more confident and willing to interact, their arguments are clearer and instances of silence or use of Greek are very few. All in all, their discussions are more fluent, to the point and easy to follow. As their level of linguistic competence does not show any improvement (lexical and grammatical inaccuracies/shortcomings are frequent), it can be argued that it is the students' communicative competence that has improved.

7.2. The Students' View

The answers to (and the discussion on) the first question revealed that most students confuse formal language knowledge with the ability to use this knowledge for communication. Most of them understood the lessons as being on *words* (67%) and *useful expressions* (78%). On the issue of vocabulary two interesting comments were made by the students. Firstly, they regarded the lessons on circumlocution as vocabulary lessons: "*We learned how to say a word in another way*", "*... it's a way to express words*". Secondly, they argued that they increased their vocabulary by using lexical items from the tasksheets during the activities: "*Because we were interested ... to keep on.*"

Some students (33%) thought they also learned grammar. Their reasons: "We learned how to talk", "We practised... by speaking in English", "You learn from your mistakes". Apart from the assumption made in the beginning, it may also be the case that students "adopted" and internalised structures used by their peers during the activities. An interesting question, of course, is whether these (allegedly internalised) structures were accurate.

Others (33%) somehow seemed to depart from this vocabulary/grammar notion and to show some awareness of the concept of strategies. They thought the lessons were on: "*Learning how to speak real English / and how to be confident*"; "*What we do when we are thinking and speaking on the same time*", "*To speak when you think something*" (meaning 'while you're thinking').

All students shared the feeling that their confidence had increased. They attributed this to the fact that "*we learned how to talk even if we're not right*", "*Even if we do not know a word we can talk*". It seemed that their insecurity primarily stemmed from fear of mistakes or inability to retrieve/use the 'right words' (as the students put it). Most of them agreed that their attitude towards speaking had changed "*...I did not like to speak... (now) I like English*". One of the students raised the issue of language use outside the classroom context: "*We do not find people*". When a joint speaking lesson with a class above their level was suggested, the students' reactions revealed an interesting fact. Most students admitted that they felt intimidated by the idea of interacting with someone of higher linguistic competence, not so much because they would not understand their interlocutors ("*We can ask questions*") but because they felt that their 'inferior' performance would be mocked ("*They will laugh at us*").

7.3. The Teacher's View (Some Reservations)

Since the 'pre' and 'post' activities as well as the corresponding feedback/questionnaires were used as evidence of the students' improvement and of the achievement of the aims, a closer look at them seems necessary, as it could reveal points that might counter the first impression.

One could argue that the improvement of the students' oral performance between the 'pre' and 'post' activities was not so much due to the remedial lessons but also to factors that may have facilitated or impeded the students' performance in each activity. Brown & Yule (1983b: 34) term such factors as "communicative stress". We will concern ourselves with the following factors:

The type of the task

- a. What exactly the students were required to do in order to carry out the activity (e.g. describe & draw, come to a consensus, tell a story from a picture sequence etc.),
- b. How familiar the students were with the particular type of task.

The topic of the activity

- a. Degree of student interest in the topic.
- b. Degree of familiarity with it.
- c. The relevant vocabulary possessed by the students.

The grouping

- a. The number of students in each group.
- b. The actual students in each group.

It seems that, in order for the improvement to be attributed to the remedial lessons, all the above factors should have remained the same in both the 'pre' and 'post' activities. I will now examine both activities against the factors listed above.

The type of task

- a. The two tasks seem to be of the same type. Harmer (1983, quoted in Bygate 1987: 71) presents such activities as "communicative activities" of the "reaching a consensus" type. Rivers & Temperley (1978, quoted in Bygate 1987: 72-73) present them as "interaction activities" in the "discussing ideas" category. Both tasks are "two-way tasks" (Bygate 1987: 65). In both activities students had some shared information (a common school background in the case of the pre-test and the information handout on the claimants in the case of the post-test). Their different views/opinions can be seen as constituting the element of "different information" (loc. cit.).
- b. Before the 'pre' activity the students did not have much exposure to similar 'decision making' activities, whereas the project-lessons offered several such opportunities during a relatively small time-span. It seems a relevant point that students were consequently more familiar with the type of task in the 'post' activity.

The topic of the activity

- a. Students showed interest in both activities but more in the 'post' one (which was shown by the fact that they ended up arguing).
- b. 'School' and 'money' matters appear to be high among students' interests, so we may assume that they were equally familiar with both topics.
- c. In both activities students relied to a great extent on the vocabulary provided by the information on the tasksheets. Therefore, it does not seem that there was considerable difference as regards the students' relevant lexical knowledge.

The grouping

- a. Whereas in the 'pre-test' students were in groups of three, in the 'post-test' students were in pairs and a group of three.
- b. This factor could be considered as remaining the same, if there had been no change in the composition of each group. This was the case up to a point. In two of the groups one of the students was absent. In the group of three one of the students was not in the 'pre-test' group.

As there was some degree of inconsistency concerning the factors mentioned, it may be the case that the improvement in students' performance was not entirely due to the remedial lessons.

A second point to be made concerns one of the aims, notably to help the students become conscious of certain achievement strategies (Bygate, 1987: 44-46, Ellis 1985: 184-185). An interpretation of the feedback after the post-questionnaire indicates that most students (66%) have not come to the point of using these strategies consciously (although they do use them effectively). This can be attributed to the absence and/or inadequacy of feedback sessions after some lessons.

8. CONCLUSIONS

It would not be an overstatement to say that probably the person who benefited most from this project was the teacher himself. Trying to identify and evaluate weaknesses -particularly in the area of communication strategies where their linguistic manifestation is the only clue the observer has- and choosing appropriate materials, devising/adapting activities/tasks and deciding on the techniques that should best be employed is bound to somehow increase the teacher's awareness concerning his 'tools', the learners and himself as a teacher.

8.1 Materials

Listening Texts

Although the use of authentic materials should be the norm if students are to become aware of (and familiarise themselves with) aspects of native oral production (Brown & Yule 1983a: 15-17), the teacher has to be consciously critical as regards the level of difficulty. In Activity 1 of Lesson 1, it took several repetitions before the (frustrated) students identified the instance of circumlocution. It seems that, since students need to be gradually made aware of aspects of native speech (in order to incorporate them in their speaking), the use of specially made "authentic like" recordings during the initial stages can be justified.

The Tape Recorder

A very important 'discovery' during this project was the *record* button on the tape recorder. Recording students' activities and feedback discussions (or recording the whole lesson for that matter) provides the teacher with usefully data. Recordings can function as a perfect monitoring device, a databank which the teacher can exploit to follow students' progress (whether in fluency or accuracy), to prepare remedial lessons or to use for awareness activities. Recordings can also provide a clear picture of the types of interaction among learners and between teacher and learners.

8.2 Feedback

Oral feedback sessions

Feedback discussions proved to be an essential element of a lesson. As far as the students are concerned, feedback sessions offer them the opportunity to exchange opinions and exploit their ability to comment on each lesson. Seeing that their comments are taken into consideration, the students feel active participants in the decision making and, therefore, may assume responsibility for their learning. As regards the teacher, feedback sessions can not only provide him with valuable information concerning the students' degree of understanding and help him decide on remedial lessons, but they can also be a source of ideas on materials/activities/ follow up lessons.

Questionnaires

They are another useful way of getting student feedback; that is, 'useful' when they are carefully prepared. There is always the danger that the teacher will impose his own ideas through questions that suggest the answer the teacher would like to get. Furthermore, questionnaires can be used to focus the students' attention on certain aspects of their own oral performance and/or on the subject matter of the following lesson(s). For example, questionnaires I and II focused the students' attention on certain achievement and reduction strategies and led them to reflect on their own (and discuss each others') performance.

It appears that a questionnaire is more effective in terms of the information provided and/or the awareness achieved when it presents the students with specific statements/answers which they have to choose from. A general question may seem less 'leading' but it will probably yield an equally general answer (e.g. if question II2 was: "What do you do when the person you are talking to 'gets stuck'?", the answers given would very likely be along the lines of "Try to help him/her"). Ideally a feedback discussion should follow the questionnaire since it may reveal any inconsistencies in students' answers.

8.3 Activities / Tasks

Topic

Although an interesting and relevant topic is essential for the success of an activity, a topic that is "too interesting" may result in L1 use. Students can become involved in the discussion to the point where communicating their ideas arises as their primary goal. Therefore, they opt for their L1, since this is the most effective means of communication at their disposal.

Procedure

A discussion can become more personalised when only the topic is given and the students are asked to formulate their own "propositions/statements" to be discussed and decided on (as opposed to providing a list to choose from). If time is provided so that the students think and jot down some ideas individually before joining their groups (or discuss them in pairs/small groups before re-grouping), then the clarity of the students' arguments is positively affected and the discussion proceeds more smoothly.

Follow up

Although the type and topic of the activities employed to develop the students' oral competence may be varied by the teacher, the interlocutors (and their relative level) and the setting (classroom, school) remain the same (during a certain period of time). However, among the students' aims are communicating with speakers of other languages and sitting certain exams (when they will be required to interact with a stranger-examiner). Furthermore, as mentioned above, as confident as the students may feel when interacting among them, they still feel

somehow inhibited when it comes to interacting with people of a higher level of competence. Therefore, it seems essential that students are given the opportunity to be involved in oral interaction with interlocutors unfamiliar to them and/or of a higher level. The most feasible solution (within the constraints of the particular teachers' situation) appears to be mixing students of different levels in 'speaking-skills' lessons.

Concerning the production of long turns (Brown & Yule 1983b: 16-20), students will benefit from training in narratives; that is from training in handling such elements of a narrative as sequence of events in time, place shifts, different participants etc. (op. cit.: 39-46).

As regards student awareness, tasks requiring students to identify strategies used by the interlocutors can be incorporated in 'listening skills' activities. Furthermore, the recordings of students' performance in oral activities can be used as data for awareness/feedback tasks (see also Nolasco & Arthur, 1987: 125-136). The students will have the opportunity to assess/discuss the development of their own production. Similarly, students could be given the tape and do the tasks as homework.

The pre and post tests

Both the pre and the post test could be carried out in two steps: In the first students would be grouped more or less randomly. In the second step students of the same level would be required to interact together (i.e. the 'stronger' and 'weaker' students would be grouped separately). A comparison of the two tests could not only reveal the degree of improvement each student had made but also provide the teacher with information on whether (or to what extent) the relative competence of the students/interlocutors may affect their individual performance.

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