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ABSTRACT

An instructional module designed to help prepare college-level teaching assistants (TAs) for their duties in second language instruction is presented. The module focuses on the teaching of oral language skills in a beginning or intermediate language course. The first section examines features of spoken language, including the range of uses of spoken language, the concepts of communicative competence and communicative efficiency, distinctions between transactional and interactional talk, formulas in spoken language, and typical spoken language episodes. The second section describes specific approaches and classroom techniques for building language learners' speaking skills, including teaching spoken language for communication, finding a balance between control and spontaneity, outlining a curriculum, using class activities to bridge the gap between language knowledge and language use, and activities teaching both. Questions for classroom discussion are dispersed throughout the text. Contains 30 references. (MSE)

Spoken Language
What It Is and How to Teach It

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one of a series of modules for the

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Table of Contents

Introduction

This module is based on several assumptions. First, we assume that you are responsible for teaching a beginning or intermediate level course in a college or university setting. We further assume that the main objectives of the course include the development of the ability to use spoken language in a variety of circumstances. Finally, we assume that the teaching approach you will use places a great deal of emphasis on communication.

Learning to communicate in another language takes a long time. It is one of the most challenging tasks your students are likely to undertake. However, as they set about this task, they have two kinds of knowledge working for them. First, they already know how to speak at least one language—their native language. True, their native language (and any other languages they may have learned) will sometimes get in their way as they try to learn another one. But it is also true that you can tap into their conscious and unconscious knowledge about how languages work to help them learn the new language. This leads to the second factor working for your students. Since they are young, relatively well educated adults, they have learned how to use their cognitive skills to analyze unfamiliar ideas and experiences and integrate them into their existing knowledge. You can help them use these cognitive abilities to build a road map through the uncharted territory of the new language.

The organization of the module is simple. First, we will look at several features of spoken language. Then we will talk about some types of learning activities that build skills for speaking.

As you read about spoken language and participate in the suggested discussions, you will probably become aware of some things about spoken communication that you have never considered before. The consciousness raising process that we use here should suggest similar strategies that you can use with your students. You can activate the cognitive processes that will make them better language learners.

The choice of learning activities to present in the later sections of the module was motivated by two considerations. First, we recognize that students need controlled practice with new language forms, but they also need opportunities to create and innovate with the language, opportunities to express their own thoughts. Second, we further recognize that your own language learning experiences may not have regularly included these more creative, innovative activities. As a consequence, you probably need more discussion of how to manage such activities in your classes and hints on how to make them succeed.

Prepare now to broaden your understanding of spoken language and to learn how to lead your students to become better and more confident speakers.

Features of Spoken Language

Uses of Spoken Language

What kinds of talk do you engage in during the course of a day or week? You may be surprised at the number and variety of spoken transactions in which you become involved. McCarthy (1991) suggests several types of speech that are probably among the most frequent (as yet, no one has produced a reliable frequency count):

- casual conversation (with strangers, friends, and intimates)
- monologues of various kinds (speeches, stories, jokes)
- telephone calls (business and private)
- service encounters (in shops, ticket offices, etc.)
- language in action (talk that accompanies actions such as demonstrating, assembling, cooking, etc.)
- organizing and directing people (at work, in the home, in the street)
- interviews (jobs, journalistic, in official settings)
- classroom talk (classes, seminars, lectures, tutorials)
- rituals (church prayers, sermons, weddings)

Even this partial listing reminds us that spoken language has many uses. In addition to its countless uses, another characteristic of spoken language is the range and subtlety of variation we discover as we compare one kind of talk to another, or as we look at one particular kind of talk in more detail. To see if you can discover some of this variation, discuss the following questions with one or two of your colleagues.

Questions for Discussion

In what ways is a particular kind of talk likely to change as we change the roles of the participants?

- How is a casual conversation between strangers different from one between friends?
- Does a doctor talk to a patient as a host would talk to a guest?
- What topics occur in conversations between waiter and diners? ticket agent and travelers? reservations clerk and hotel guests?

What connection is there between the kind of talk and the setting in which it occurs?

- Would you expect the same kinds of talk between co-workers in an office and a team of construction workers on a job site?
- How does a lecture differ from a seminar?
- Would you tell the same kinds of jokes in a church and at a cocktail party?

continued on next page

How does the kind of talk limit the topics and themes that are introduced?

- How does a job interview differ from a reporter's interview of a famous author?
- What topics are you likely to bring up in a social phone call that you wouldn't talk about in a business call?

How do language functions vary from one kind of talk to another?

- Can an employer express displeasure with an employee's work in the same way that a parent scolds a child?
- How do a campaign speech and a sermon compare with regard to the ways they try to persuade their audiences?

By asking questions such as these, we begin to discover how speakers adapt their language to accommodate many varying factors. Spoken (and written) language changes according to the number of participants involved and the social and psychological roles they play in relation to one another. Settings, topics, and functions interact with participants in intricate ways. Competent speakers of a language have learned to take into account who is speaking to whom, in what circumstances, about what, and for what reason. Non-native learners of a language need to become conscious of such adjustments and accommodations in order to avoid creating misunderstanding or giving unintentional insult to those with whom they are speaking.

Communicative Competence and Communicative Efficiency

The ability to adjust and accommodate one's language to the context is part of what is called *communicative competence*, a concept that has evolved over the years (Hymes, 1971; Canale and Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1972, 1983) to encapsulate the various kinds of knowledge that underlie language proficiency. Proficiency in a language goes beyond knowledge of its grammar and vocabulary, which we may call *linguistic* or *grammatical competence*. Because language does not occur in random series of unrelated sentences, we also have to know how to interpret sentences within a larger linguistic context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. This is called *discourse competence*. Furthermore, as we have already seen, proficiency includes knowledge of how to use and respond to language appropriately, taking into account settings, topics, functions, and role relationships. This sort of knowledge is called *sociolinguistic competence*, a term that emphasizes the importance of the social context that surrounds the use of a language. And finally, because there are often breakdowns in communication and gaps in the other kinds of competence, a fourth kind of knowledge, called *strategic competence*, is needed. This includes the ability to detect and repair communication breakdowns, to find alternative ways of saying things when words or forms fail you, and even to use nonverbal means of communication if necessary.

In short, "mastering" a language (if we dare to use such a term) implies being able to produce, in a wide variety of circumstances, grammatically correct, logically connected sentences that are appropriate to the context. You may want to add the requirement of acceptable pronunciation, if the circumstances call for spoken communication. If the truth were told, not all native speakers have an expert command of their own language, and to develop a high level of communicative competence in a second language is a daunting challenge. In fact, most researchers into second language acquisition would probably agree with Larsen-Freeman (1991:337) that "For most adult learners, complete mastery of the L2 [second language] may be impossible." Amplifying this statement, she goes on to say, "Teachers obviously should encourage learners to go as far as they are capable of going in the L2, but teachers should also be realistic in their expectations."

In the classroom, then, teachers and learners may aim to develop all aspects of communicative competence to the highest degree possible. At the same time, being realistic in their expectations, both teachers and learners may want to keep in mind the more workable alternative of "communicative efficiency" (Harmer, 1991). The idea behind communicative efficiency is that learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should strive to avoid confusion in the message (due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary) and to avoid offending communication partners (due to socially inappropriate style). While learners may not become as communicatively competent as a native speaker of equivalent educational background, they should always seek to be as communicatively efficient as possible, and it is reasonable to expect communicative efficiency to increase as learners progress in their language study.

Transactional Talk and Interactional Talk

Looking again at the various kinds of talk listed at the beginning of this module, we can point out that they differ in yet another way. Linguists who analyze spoken discourse (Brown and Yule, 1983; McCarthy, 1991—among others) make a general distinction between *transactional talk* and *interactional talk*. The main purpose of transactional talk is to get business done. We could say that transactional talk is message oriented: it is important that the message is clearly expressed so that there is less chance for misunderstanding. Interactional talk is much more people oriented: its main purpose is to establish and maintain social relationships. Precise understanding is not required, and conversation partners allow each other a lot of vagueness and even inaccuracy. Typically, no one challenges the other speakers, since the general function of interactional talk is to lubricate the social machinery, not to convey information.

It is probably true that in all natural languages we may find both transactional and interactional talk. However, analysts are quick to point out that "talk is rarely all one thing or the other" (McCarthy, 1991:136). "[E]ven in the most strictly 'transactional' of settings, people often engage in interactional talk, exchanging chat about the weather and many unpredictable things." In this regard, you might like to try a small-scale social experiment. The next time you hand your purchases to a check-out clerk, try opening the transaction with a standard social formula such as, "Hi, how are you today?" Compare the general quality of the transaction to another occasion when you skip the social formula.

The degree of mixing of interactional and transactional talk varies from one culture to another, and from one situation to another within a culture. In the American business world, two speakers in a telephone call are likely to minimize interactional talk in favor of getting directly to the point of the call. The same two people meeting for a business lunch may range over a number of trivial topics before reaching any items of business, and the lunch usually ends with still more inconsequential talk. In other cultures, all interactions and transactions begin with several almost ritualized exchanges whose omission would be unthinkable. The appropriate mix of interactional and transactional talk is just one more source of variability to which the language learner must be alert. The teacher must also be alert, making sure that students have adequate practice in both forms of talk.

Interactional talk, and many kinds of transactional talk as well, are interactive. That is, communication requires cooperation between partners who work together to construct the interaction or transaction. Although it sometimes happens that one of the speakers assumes the initiative and plays a dominant role, the other participant(s) do not listen in silence. They must assume the role of junior partner, filling the short pauses with appropriate minimal responses. Brown and Yule (1983:28-30) point out how useful such responses can be for beginners who are trying to hold up their end of the conversation. You can help your students build up a stock of responses similar to the following expressions in English:

- agreeing to cooperate or not: *yes, of course; okay; sorry, I can't; I'm afraid not*
- agreeing with what was said: *absolutely; yes, that's right; yes, I do; yes, he was*
- politely disagreeing: *well, not really; perhaps not quite as bad as that*
- indicating possible doubt: *really?; are you sure?*
- expressing an opinion: *really nice; very nice indeed; not very nice; very bad; really quite nasty*
- stalling while planning one's own turn: fillers: *well; uhhh; ummm*; prefabricated phrases: *of course; it's clear that; I suppose; I think*

And of course, it is extremely useful to know attention signals such as the "uh-huh" we use in English.

Questions for Discussion

The following transcription of a conversation (Brown and Yule, 1983: 5) illustrates some of the features of spoken language that we have just examined. So that you can get more of the flavor of the actual conversation, the usual punctuation is omitted; however, three different pause lengths are indicated: a hyphen (-) indicates a very brief pause, a plus sign (+) indicates a short pause, and a double plus (++) indicates a long pause.

- First read through the whole conversation to answer this question: Is this an example of transactional talk or of interactional talk? Why do you think so?

continued on next page

- Read through the conversation again. This time underline all the examples you can find of vague expressions or non-specific language. Examples: In David's fourth speech we find "they," "do it," and "for that." You have to interpret these terms by reference to the context. Also "sort of supply" is less precise than "supply" alone.

- Discuss the terms you underlined and explain how the context makes them understandable. Or does it?

- Who is the "junior partner" in the conversation? In what ways do the junior partner's contributions support the "senior partner"?

David:	on occasion we do a bit of reading along there +
Kate:	uh huh
David:	and we're all sort of called on to do that from time to time
Kate:	what does that involve
David:	well + one of our main jobs in the Botanics is writing for the flora of Turkey +
Kate:	uh huh
David:	they haven't got the scientists to do it so + we sort of supply the scientists for that +
Kate:	uh huh
David:	well when + you've got all the scientific work written up - we sort of check through it and one - reads and the others +
Kate:	oh I see you read aloud
David:	uh huh that's right
Kate:	I see
David:	and then you sort of switch back and forward like this +
Kate:	uh huh + and that doesn't bother you
David:	it does actually (laughter) I'm terrible at it + but I don't know +
Kate:	even when it's something you're interested in +
David:	well - it makes it a bit easier to read certainly but + uhm just because you're reading to somebody else you feel + a bit uneasy somehow
Kate:	uh huh
James:	I think it comes from + having to stand up and read in school +

Turn Taking

Another feature of competence which speakers of the same language tacitly share is rules of turn taking. English—like many other languages—favors the rule of "one speaker at a time," so in spoken interactions in English there will usually be few if any instances of speakers overlapping each other. However, in some languages, as Fasold (1990:72) says, "simultaneous talk is valued, even required." Even in English, there are exceptions to the one-at-a-time rule. Simultaneous talk in English may consist of "brief, quietly uttered expressions of support for the current speaker, such as 'yeah,' 'mhm,' or brief restatings of the current speaker's most recent thoughts" (Fasold, 1990:70-71). Or overlap may be much more extensive than this. Tannen (1986:188) describes a "high involvement" conversational style typical of many New Yorkers, in which it is appropriate "to talk along with others as a way of showing enthusiasm, understanding, and rapport." One partner may anticipate the end of another's sentence and chime in for the last few words. A partner may even fire an "interrupting" question at the current speaker, who may smoothly incorporate an answer into the ongoing talk, or else ignore the question until a convenient later point (Fasold, 1990; Tannen, 1990).

Turn-taking rules, rate of speech, usual length of pauses between speakers—these are characteristics of the spoken language which ordinarily do not receive much attention in language courses. In fact, written representations and tape recordings of dialogues that are specifically designed for pedagogical purposes are likely to depict the speakers politely alternating with each other and smartly taking up their own turns as soon as the current speaker has finished. Audiotape recordings and videos of authentic conversation are a valuable antidote to such distortions introduced by pedagogical materials. While learners may not be able to emulate exactly what they hear and see, at least they will not be taken by surprise when they encounter natural native speaker behavior.

Students need to be made aware of possible differences in turn-taking rules. A good way to begin is by raising their consciousness about turn-taking behavior in English. With this information as a background, they can then be led to observe video- and audiotapes of natural communication in the target language more closely, looking for signals of turn taking in the speakers' behavior. McCarthy (1991; 127-129) describes some of the ways in which participants in a conversation or discussion in English organize themselves to take turns.

1. People take turns when they are selected or nominated by the current speaker. A speaker may say "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes, would you?" or "Carol hasn't said what she thinks of the movie yet," thus tacitly offering a turn to another speaker.
2. People may select themselves to take the next turn, if it appears that the current speaker's turn is coming to a close. For example, in English certain changes in pitch level signal the end of an utterance and the possibility that the speaker is ready to yield the floor to another participant.
3. If the flow of conversation prevents a participant from getting a turn, there are verbal and nonverbal ways of doing so. Nonverbal means include an audible intake of breath (as if preparing to speak), a movement of the hand (perhaps a vestige of the classroom behavior of raising one's hand to be called on), and eye contact with the speaker. Verbal means must be appropriate to the situation. They range from "I wonder if I might say something," to "Shut up, will you? I can't get a word in edgewise."
4. There are also ways that speakers can ensure that they will not be interrupted until they have finished their turn. One technique is to set up sign posts such as: "I'll try to be brief, but there are a number of things I'd like to say." "My second point is..." "Just one last point, and I'll finish."

When observing turn-taking behavior in another language and culture, students need to be especially alert to norms that conflict with the behavior they are accustomed to in their own language and culture. For example, although the norm in English is that turns usually do not overlap, it is also the norm that silences between turns are quite brief—on average, less than a second (McCarthy, 1991). In other cultures (e.g., among the Japanese), there is much more "thinking time" before a response.

Formulas in Spoken Language

We have considered turn-taking behavior from the point of view of how people know when it is their turn to talk, how they interrupt another speaker's turn, and how they protect themselves from being interrupted. Now let's look more closely at how speakers follow up on what the other participants in the conversation are saying. Often, the relationship between a speaker's turn and the one that follows it is quite predictable. McCarthy (1991) lists a few examples of such mutually dependent pairs, in which a given type of utterance expects a certain type of response.

Utterance Function	Expected Response
greeting Good morning.	*greeting* Good morning, Ted.
congratulations Glad to hear you passed the bar exam.	*thanks* Oh, thanks very much.
apology Sorry I'm late.	*acceptance* No problem.
inform Frozen foods are in aisle five.	*acknowledge* Thanks.
leave taking So long.	*leave taking* Yeah, see you tomorrow.

As with other aspects of turn taking, you can make your students aware of these highly predictable exchanges in English and then help them to recognize and learn similar exchanges in the target language. Writers of language learning materials recognize the existence of such mutually dependent pairs and often incorporate them into their lessons as formulas to be memorized.

As investigators have studied the structure of discourse, they have found that somewhat longer stretches of conversation may also have a relatively predictable structure. In the sample formulas listed above, we find a two-part exchange: the apology "Sorry I'm late."

followed by the response, "No problem." Frequently, however, the apology part of the exchange is longer than this, and the expanded form follows a rather common pattern (Meloni, Thompson, and Beley, 1982):

1. An expression of regret or a request for forgiveness
   I'm really sorry.
   Please forgive me.
   I apologize.

2. An excuse, a reason, or a statement of responsibility
   I was so busy that I forgot.
   I didn't mean to do it.
   It was my own fault. I was so tired last night that I forgot to set my alarm clock.

3. A promise to improve, or a promise not to do it again
   I assure you it will never happen again.
   I give you my word I'll be on time from now on.
   I promise I won't forget again.

4. An offer to do something to improve the situation
   I'll stay late tonight to finish the report.
   I'll buy you a new dish.

Putting all the pieces together, an expanded apology might be:

> I'm sorry I missed our meeting this morning. I was so tired last night that I forgot to set my alarm clock and I overslept. I won't let it happen again. I could meet with you after lunch, if you're free.

For exchanges involving apologies, compliments, invitations, suggestions, agreements/disagreements and the like, you can make your students aware of the parts of the exchanges and use learning activities to show them how to manage and vary the exchanges.

Maintaining and Shifting Conversation Topics

Most of spoken discourse is not as predictable as the examples we have just seen. Even so, when conversation is proceeding smoothly, the participants know how to follow up on one another's utterances. They can also recognize when a topic of conversation has been exhausted and shift the talk onto a new course. The following example, adapted from McCarthy (1991) illustrates how this may be done.

> A group of people are having New Year's drinks together. Ted has been telling the others how his baggage got sent to another airport on a recent skiing holiday.

Topic 1

Ted: ...no bother to me, because I happened to have spare socks and underwear in my carry-on bag.

Carol: Ah, I see, that was in your hand luggage, was it?

Ted: And I had my toilet kit with me.

Carol: Yeah, it's a good idea to take a few basic things in the hand luggage, isn't it, I think in case of that.

Ted: Yeah, well it's usually the things you need first, you see. Sometimes you don't have time to unpack all your suitcases when you arrive.

Carol: Still, pretty horrendous, though.

Ted: Oh, it was very unsettling...still, so many other unsettling factors I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels that day.

Carol: Mmm...

Topic 2

Frank: Do you do a lot of skiing, then?

Topic 3

Ted: I go each year, yes...it's my only chance of getting my wieght down, you see. And it isn't the exercise that does it, it's the fact that the meals are so far apart.

Frank: (laughs)

Sue: Yeah?

Topic 4

Ted: Yes, I'm not joking...if we eat say, breakfast eight, lunch one, evening meal six, perhaps a snack after that then you're eating four times a day but...

Frank: You'd never get any skiing in, would you?

Ted: Well, in these places, you breakfast at eight, well, half past eight, ...(etc.)

The overall topic is "Ted's recent holiday," but within a short time, the conversation progresses through four subtopics: lost baggage, skiing, weight watching and exercise, and meal times at hotels. How do the participants know when it is permissible to shift the topic? How do they know what topic can appropriately follow what has just been said? The signals are there, for those who know how to pick up on them.

Notice that, at the end of the first subtopic, both Ted and Carol use the word "still." This would be spoken with a falling pitch, followed by a slight pause (indicated by the comma after "still"). This serves as a boundary marker, a sign that the topic has run out. Other words in English that can have the same function are "so" and "anyway." Ted and Carol also give a summary or evaluation of what has gone before. This is another way of closing a topic.

Responding to these signals, and to the slightly longer pause indicated by the ellipsis (...) after Carol's "Mmm," Frank changes to the second subtopic, skiing, which is not a completely new idea because the lost luggage anecdote is part of Ted's skiing holiday. When speakers shift the topic they commonly use the device of tying it to some element of the preceding conversation.

Ted doesn't stay with the new subtopic for long. He answers "I go each year, yes," followed by a short pause, then segues rapidly to the third subtopic, weight watching and exercise. After a quick exchange among Frank, Sue, and Ted, followed by another pause (...), Ted shifts to the fourth subtopic, meal times at hotels. The third and fourth subtopics are associated in Ted's mind with the second. These rapid shifts (second subtopic to third, third subtopic to fourth) occurring within the turn of one speaker do not seem unusual. They are extremely common in this kind of interactional talk.

Scripts for Communication

Most second or foreign language learners would probably agree that learning to carry on conversations like this one is an elusive skill. Plenty of support is called for during the learning process, both in the form of consciousness raising about the distinctive features of the language and in appropriate practice to become comfortable in managing them. Before we discuss the ways of practicing language, however, let's look at one more feature of spoken language that you can call to your students' attention.

As we grow up in a particular speech community, we come to share many expectations about the kinds of verbal exchanges that we are likely to encounter. These expectations make up part of our background knowledge about our culture. We are familiar with dozens, possibly hundreds, of potential communication situations, each of them associated with a somewhat predictable set of actions accompanied by spoken language. Researchers have given various names to this kind of knowledge, but one name that seems particularly appropriate for spoken language is "scripts." Richards (1983:223) talks about scripts from the perspective of listening comprehension:

> Much of our knowledge of the world is organized around *scripts*, that is, memory for typical episodes that occur in specific situations. Our knowledge of dentist's scripts, cinema scripts, library scripts, drugstore scripts, school scripts, meal scripts, and so on, enables us to interpret a great deal of the language of everyday life....But if we lack a relevant script, comprehension may be difficult.

Thus, knowledge of the "script" for a situation considerably eases the communication load, even in one's native language. It not only helps us to interpret what others say to us, but it also prepares us with a stock of language that we can use in response. In speaking a second or foreign language, we may run into problems caused not just by lack of language but also by lack of familiarity with the appropriate script. This is another argument for giving students opportunities for practice with extended stretches of discourse and for making them conscious of the distinguishing aspects of different communication situations.

Questions for Discussion

This exercise will allow you to explore your knowledge of "scripts" in English. Divide into small groups that work independently of one another. There are two objectives: (1) to recreate the language associated with a particular script; (2) to compare the results obtained by your group with those of other groups.

- You arrive for dinner at the home of friends. Although you have known them for several months, this is the first time you have been at their house. Create a short conversation (4-6 speeches) that would take place just as you arrive and enter the house.

- You feel that the evening is drawing to a close and that it is time for you to leave. What do you say? How do your hosts respond?

- You had a good time at your friends' home. You don't feel that a written thank you is called for, but you do want them to know that you enjoyed the visit. You see your hosts the next day. How do you express your thanks? How do they answer?

Did you find it easy or difficult to create the conversations for each script? How much similarity was there between your group's conversations and those of the other groups?

Building Speaking Skills

Teaching Spoken Language for Communication

This module on the teaching of speaking, like the other modules in the series, assumes that you will be teaching courses that follow a communicative approach to language teaching. When we teach spoken language for communication, our goal is to enable our students, when they have completed our courses, to use whatever language they have at their disposal to produce spoken messages as they carry out a range of tasks in a variety of contexts outside the classroom. They should be able to use the language to interpret, express, and negotiate meaning. In communicative language teaching, the emphasis is on what the learner is able to *do* in and with the language.

Although there are several approaches to second and foreign language teaching that purportedly focus on teaching the spoken language, in most cases they turn out to have a quite restricted view of what constitutes spoken language and speaking (Shrum and Glisan, 1994). To take one example, the audiolingual method (ALM) was revolutionary in its day for, among other things, giving greater priority to listening and speaking skills than to reading and writing. However, in actual practice "speaking" usually meant repeating after the teacher, reciting memorized dialogues, and practicing cleverly constructed but rather mechanical pronunciation and grammar drills. Learners had few opportunities to use the language for expressing their own meanings in novel communications.

One successor to the ALM was cognitive code learning, which advocated more meaningful use of the target language and more opportunities for learners to use the language creatively. Other successors have proclaimed themselves to be "communicative" approaches. However, even under these approaches, there is often not much time for real communication. Walz (1989) reports on several studies that found the majority of class time still being spent in activities that were not communication. Frequently the teachers themselves were not aware of the lack of communicative activity.

How can we know when we are teaching for communication? What makes a language activity "communicative" and "real"? Taylor (1983:73-74) identifies five features of real communication:

1. Participants deal with stretches of spontaneous language above the sentence level.
2. One of the major purposes of communication is to bridge an information gap.
3. Speakers have a choice not only of what they will say but also of how they will say it.
4. Speakers have a goal in mind while they are speaking—usually the successful completion of some kind of real task.
5. Both speaker and hearer must attend to many factors quickly and at the same time.

It is instructive to judge typical oral activities in the language class in terms of these features of real communication. Discuss the following questions with your colleagues.

Questions for Discussion

Examine the following speaking activities commonly found in the language classroom. In what ways do they fail to meet Taylor's criteria for real communication?

- repeating something modeled by the teacher or a tape recording
- reciting a dialog from memory
- reciting a poem from memory
- answering questions based on a reading selection
- answering questions such as "What day comes after Wednesday?"

As you think of the usual oral activities in the language classroom you may be hard pressed to identify any that require learners to organize and express their thoughts in longer spoken texts, such as instructions, anecdotes, or narratives. Learners may rarely have occasion to produce or respond to spontaneous language. Questions asked in the language classroom are often those for which the questioner already knows the answer—there is no information gap. In fact, in many exercises, there is a single, predetermined "correct answer." Conversation practice does not usually put the learners in the position of having to adapt their messages so as to repair communication breakdowns—to clarify their meanings or to ask for confirmation of their own understanding. How often do oral activities compel the learners to focus on accomplishing an authentic task, such as conveying a telephone message, conducting an opinion survey among classmates, or agreeing on a mutually convenient time for a club meeting?

Striking a Balance

Conventional wisdom used to hold that learners were not ready for original and spontaneous communication until they reached the intermediate or advanced level of language study. ALM methodology, for example, put great emphasis on the possible dangers of such unfettered communication. Without adequate preparation, learners were bound to make mistakes, and committing mistakes, it was feared, could lead to the formation of bad habits. To avoid such an outcome, learners were led through a chain of listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities (in that order) and were never required to say anything "spontaneously" that they had not thoroughly practiced in earlier exercises. Some learners did manage to make the transition from these carefully controlled exercises to free expression. Many did not, and many felt the frustration of always having to talk in canned phrases, never being able to "talk off the tops of their heads" (Rivers, 1972).

In reaction to such rigid restraints, some early practitioners of the more communicative approaches adopted an "anything goes" attitude. Learners were urged to focus on trying to get their messages across without worrying about making mistakes in grammar and vocabulary. At present, the methodology of communicative language teaching appears to have reached a more balanced position. Methodologists recognize that both control and spontaneity have their place, that sometimes it is necessary to pay close attention to the accuracy of the forms being used, and at other times fluency in expressing one's ideas and feelings is more important.

A balanced activities approach

Harmer (1991:40-42) advocates what he calls a "balanced activities" approach, taking into account language input, practice output, and communicative output. Language input—in such forms as teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages, and the language heard and read outside class—gives learners the raw material they need to begin producing language on their own. Language output forces learners to select and use the appropriate language items from their total existing store. Their ability to use the language improves as the teacher or other communication partners provide feedback on the success of the learners' attempts to communicate.

Language input. Some input is roughly tuned; that is, it is more difficult than the learners' current level of comprehension. Roughly tuned input is often found in activities where the ostensible purpose is learning to listen or learning to read, especially when authentic listening or reading passages are used. While learners will not comprehend every word of such input, at the same time they are unconsciously acquiring new bits of language. In contrast, some input is more finely tuned; it is judged (by the teacher or the textbook author) to be closely matched to the learners' current comprehension level. Exercises featuring finely tuned input are carefully controlled and will usually be found in the presentation stage of a lesson plan. The focus with this type of input is on conscious learning of bits of language: the correct pronunciation of a word, the contrast in the uses of two verb tenses, new vocabulary, useful social formulas.

Practice output. This is a way stage on the path to communicative output. In practice output, accuracy of performance is important. It is designed to make learners comfortable producing specific language items recently introduced, sometimes in combination with previously learned items. Practice output exercises often directly follow the presentation stage of the lesson plan. However, because production is limited to preselected items, practice output cannot be truly communicative.

Communicative output. In truly communicative output, the learners' main purpose is to complete some kind of communicative task; e.g.: "Ask your neighbor to take in your mail, water your plants, and care for your cat while you are away on a one-month vacation." When the focus is on such a task, language becomes a tool, rather than an end in itself. In most communicative output activities, learners will have to call on any or all of the language that they know. They will be forced to develop communication strategies (strategic competence) which they would not otherwise develop if they were limited only to finely tuned input and practice output. In communicative output activities, the criterion of success is whether the learner gets the message across. Accuracy is not a consideration unless the lack of it interferes with the message.

In a balanced activities approach, the teacher ensures that learners get a variety of activities from these different categories of input and output. Most importantly, learners at all proficiency levels—including beginners—will benefit from this variety of activities. Not only is such variety more motivating, it is also more likely to result in effective language learning. As Savignon says (1991:269), "[F]or the development of communicative ability, research findings overwhelmingly support the *integration* of form-focused exercises [Harmer's finely tuned input and practice output] with meaning-focused experience [roughly tuned input, communicative output]." (Emphasis in the original.)

Encouraging communication in the classroom

The techniques that teachers use are often greatly influenced by their own experiences in language learning. If your previous language learning was under an approach that featured strong control over input and output, you will probably find it difficult to give your students free rein to communicate. Bragger (1985) and Lewis and Hill (1992) offer advice on ways teachers should modify their behavior so as to encourage communication in the classroom.

To begin with, when you are doing communicative output activities, instead of drilling or quizzing your students, adopt a conversational mode. When you talk with your friends, you listen to the content of what they are saying. You don't interrupt them to correct their pronunciation or grammar. (If you do, your friends probably think you are impossibly pedantic.) Try to carry this conversational frame of mind into communicative output activities in the language class. Speak to your students at a normal rate of speed, using the language as naturally as you would when talking to native speakers.

When the students are talking to one another don't expect all of them to contribute equally to the conversation. However, when they are not speaking they can be active listeners (junior partners), supporting the speaker with encouraging remarks such as "Really? That's very interesting. What did you do then?"

Conversation and discussion do not always have to be about serious issues. Students are likely to be more motivated to participate if the topic is about daily trivia such as movies or television programs, plans for a holiday or vacation, or news about mutual friends. Weighty topics like how to combat pollution are not as engaging; moreover, they place heavy demands on students' linguistic competence. And don't be afraid to drop a topic if they students' interest begins to fade. In real life conversation, we normally change the subject when our listeners lose interest.

Encourage students to experiment and innovate with the language. Create a supportive atmosphere that allows them to make mistakes without fear of embarrassment. Which returns us to the issue of correction of mistakes. Of all activities you do with your students, conversation is preeminently one in which the flow of talk should not be interrupted by the teacher's corrections. Although you won't correct your students while they are trying to communicate, you can make a mental note of any recurring errors. A communicative output activity should be followed by a feedback session in which students verify whether they have successfully carried out the task set for the activity. At this time you can also comment on inaccurate or inappropriate language forms you have noted.

Outlining a Curriculum

Sometimes, the scope of language teaching materials is deliberately limited so as to serve the needs of a particular group of learners who are studying the language for a specific purpose. For example, for specialists who want to keep up with the technical literature of their fields, for managers in multinational corporations who want to conduct business negotiations, for airline pilots who must communicate with air traffic control, or for Peace Corps volunteers who need to talk with villagers about agricultural practices, it is more efficient to use materials that allow the learners to concentrate on the language forms and functions that are most appropriate to their needs.

For learners whose needs are not so specifically defined, however, the common practice in communicatively oriented courses is to present a fairly wide range of formal and informal uses of spoken language. This immediately raises the question of an appropriate scope and developmental sequence for the features of language that are to be taught. Before the advent of communicative language teaching, courses were usually structured according to a sequence of grammatical features, starting with the "easiest" features and proceeding as far into more "difficult" grammar as time allowed. However, if we are teaching for communicative competence, we have to take more than grammar into account. We need to enable learners to carry out communicative tasks and deal with topics or themes in settings they will find in the target culture. How can textbook writers and teachers decide which tasks, topics, and settings to teach, and in what sequence they should be taught?

Some methodologists (Omaggio Hadley, 1993; Shrum and Glisan, 1994) suggest that curriculum designers use the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* (1986) as a frame of reference when deciding the focus of various proficiency levels in language instruction. The guidelines characterize proficiency levels for speaking in terms of five criteria:

- the communicative functions that the speaker can handle in the language
- the contexts (circumstances, settings) in which the language is spoken
- the topics or themes of conversation
- the degree of accuracy and appropriateness of the language produced
- the length and quality of organization of the spoken discourse

In particular, the criteria of functions, contexts, and topics/themes can help us to decide the range of spoken language to be reflected in our language teaching materials.

Some communicative functions, such as identifying oneself or seeking information, can be carried out at any proficiency level, with complexity of language and finesse in execution increasing as the learner's proficiency increases. Other functions, by their very nature, place greater demands on the speaker. Among more sophisticated uses of language are the functions of making and justifying hypotheses, and presenting an argument to convince others of one's point of view.

With regard to contexts, at first learners are able to communicate only in very familiar, well rehearsed situations (i.e., situations in which they can anticipate the "script"): at home with family and friends, at school with classmates. Gradually they learn to handle most common social situations: shopping, service encounters, eating out. Ultimately they can deal with the more abstract and cognitively demanding language needed for study and work situations.

In topics and themes, the learner progresses from limited statements about the most concrete objects, places, and people (talking about family members, describing food preferences), to topics requiring a higher degree of social interaction (travel arrangements, health and medical needs), to topics of current personal or public interest (work responsibilities on a new job, the qualifications of candidates running for political office).

Accuracy, and utterance and discourse length improve as proficiency advances. From disjointed utterances of one or two words, often spoken with labored pronunciation, the learner develops the ability to open a conversation, sustain it for several exchanges, and close it off in an appropriate manner. There may still be obvious errors, but the learner has also begun to develop communication strategies to compensate for linguistic shortcomings. Eventually the learner becomes confident in two-way communication, can sustain a coherent monologue such as a speech or narrative, and is quite adept in the use of compensating communication strategies.

Building a Bridge to Communication

In the balanced activities approach mentioned earlier, Harmer (1991) advocates a mix of practice output and communicative output, of activities that familiarize students with specific features of language and activities that approximate real communication. Increasingly, newer foreign language textbooks feature activities that encourage communication, yet teachers may not be as familiar with communication activities as they are with drill and practice. In fact, many teachers may have had unpleasant experiences in previous attempts at "discussion" or "conversation" in the classroom. For these reasons, they may hesitate to attempt communication activities with their students.

In recent years, however, the methodology of communicative language teaching has made important advances. Activities for both practice output and communicative output have become more varied and interesting, and the development of teaching techniques has kept pace with the introduction of new forms of activities. It *is* possible to achieve a balance of activities at *all* proficiency levels; communicative output is feasible even with beginners. In the remainder of this module, we will examine several types of instructional activities that are commonly used in communicative language teaching. We will see how these activities serve as a bridge from the classroom to real life communication.

Before discussing the activities, however, let's examine some of the reasons that communication activities in the classroom often fail. Then we will see what can be done to improve the situation. Pattison (1987:243) lists some of the problems of class discussions or conversations:

1. Organized discussion is often artificial. and doubly so in the foreign language.
2. Large groups make normal exchanges of views and comments very difficult.
3. Not everyone has something to say on the given topic.
4. Not everyone is willing and able to speak spontaneously in the foreign language (or even in their own!).

Questions for Discussion

Think of your own language learning experiences in the classroom, especially the times when "free conversation" was the activity.

- How did you feel about this kind of activity?
- Did you and your conversation partner(s) find something to talk about?
- Did you have to struggle to find the grammar and vocabulary that you needed?
- Did you get to practice some social routines; e.g., offering and accepting or rejecting an invitation, paying and accepting a compliment, making a suggestion?
- Did you feel that you had carried out a real conversation? For example, did you and your partner(s) find out anything that you hadn't known before the activity began?

Ur (1981:3-11) and Pattison (1987:243-244) suggest ways of overcoming these problems. Topics may be provided by the textbook or teacher, or by the learners themselves. But rather than students simply being told to discuss a particular topic, activities are designed so that there is a gap in information or ideas or opinions to be filled, and the outcome of the activities is a decision or series of decisions. The need to fill the gap and arrive at a decision makes the discussion less artificial and relieves some of the students' reluctance to speak.

Other difficulties are overcome in the way that the teacher sets up and leads into the exercises. Enough input (topical information and language forms) is given to the students so that they have something to say and the words with which to say it. Discussion is also facilitated by dividing larger classes into pairs or small groups. Most students feel more comfortable when speaking with just a few partners. Further, in communication activities that involve role play, assuming another persona can also relieve a student's feeling of inhibition in group discussions. As we look at specific types of instructional activities, we will see how these measures help to ensure more and better language output from the students.

Practice Output Activities

We will begin with two types of activities—information gap and jigsaw—which are more than mere drill but which still result in practice output. In both these types of activities, participants complete a task by finding out one or more pieces of missing information, a feature the activities have in common with real communication. However, at least in their simplest forms, information gap and jigsaw activities have the additional purpose of setting up practice on specific items of language. In this respect they are more like drills than communication.

One information gap activity that has many possible variations involves filling the gaps in a schedule or timetable. In one version, Partner A holds an airline timetable with some of the arrival and departure times missing. Partner B has the same timetable but with different blank spaces. The two partners are not permitted to see each other's timetables and must fill in the blanks by asking each other appropriate questions. The features of language that are practiced would include questions beginning with "when" or "at what time." Answers would be limited mostly to time expressions like "at 8:15" or "at ten in the evening."

In another example of an information gap activity, the two partners have similar pictures, each with different missing details. They cooperate to find all the missing details. In still another variation, no items are missing, but similar items differ in appearance. For example, in one picture, a man walking along the street may be wearing an overcoat, while in the other the man is wearing a leather jacket. The features of grammar and vocabulary that are practiced are determined by the content of the pictures and the items that are missing or different. Differences in the activities depicted would lead to practice of verbs. Differences in number, size, shape, and the like would require adjectival forms. Differing locations would probably be described with prepositional phrases.

These activities may be set up so that the partners must practice more than just grammatical and lexical features. "Information gap activities provide a good opportunity for students to learn how to ask for clarification, how to request information, and how to negotiate when faced with misunderstandings" (Shrum and Glisan, 1994:159). These are all functions of real communication. It is even possible to cause students to become more conscious of the sociolinguistic aspects of the interaction. For example, the basic schedule or timetable activity gains a social dimension when one partner assumes the role of a student trying to make an appointment with a partner who takes the role of a professor. Each partner has pages from an appointment book in which certain dates and times are already filled in and other times are still available for an appointment. Of course, the open times don't match exactly, so there must be some polite negotiation to arrive at a mutually convenient time for a meeting or a conference.

Jigsaw activities are essentially a more elaborate form of information gap activities. While the latter usually involve only two, or perhaps three, partners, jigsaws can be done with several partners. There are practical limits, of course: too many partners will only lead to confusion. In a jigsaw activity, each partner has one or a few pieces of the "puzzle," and the partners must cooperate to fit all the pieces into a whole picture. The puzzle piece may take one of several forms. It may be one panel from a comic strip or one photo from a set that tells a story. It may be one sentence from a written narrative. It may be a tape recording of a conversation, in which case no two partners hear exactly the same conversation.

In one fairly simple jigsaw activity, the class is divided into groups of four. Each student in the group is given one panel from a comic strip. Partners may not show each other their panels. Together the four panels present this narrative: a man takes a container of ice cream from the freezer; he serves himself several scoops of ice cream; he sits in front of the TV eating his ice cream; he returns with the empty bowl to the kitchen and finds that he left the container of ice cream, now melting, on the kitchen counter. These pictures have a clear narrative line and the partners are not likely to disagree about the appropriate sequencing.

You can make the task more demanding, however, by using pictures that lend themselves to alternative sequences, so that the partners have to negotiate among themselves to agree on a satisfactory sequence.

More elaborate jigsaws may proceed in two stages. Students are first organized into different "input groups," say Groups A, B, C, and D. After they have received the information on which the task is based, they are reorganized into groups of four with one student each from A, B, C, and D. Such an organization could be used, for example, when the input is given in the form of a tape recording. Groups A, B, C, and D each hear a different recording of a short news bulletin. The four recordings all contain the same general information, but each has one or more details that the others don't. In the second stage, students reconstruct the complete story by comparing the four versions.

As Klippel (1984) points out, jigsaw tasks require students to practice both transactional and interactional language. First, they must understand the information that forms the input for the task and then describe or explain it to their partner(s). The language here is transactional: the emphasis is on conveying an accurate message. Second, they have to cooperate to find the solution, using interactional functions like suggesting, agreeing, and disagreeing. With all instructional activities, teachers need to be conscious of the language demands they impose on their students. If an activity calls for language your students have not already practiced, you can brainstorm with them when setting up the activity to preview the language they will need, eliciting what they already know and supplementing what they are able to produce themselves.

The two types of activities we have just examined both feature one or more information gaps which must be bridged for successful completion of the activity. But as Taylor (1983) points out, gaps in information are just one of the characteristics of real communication. In real communication, language is spontaneous. Speakers have a choice not only of what they will say but also of how they will say it. In contrast, information gap and jigsaw activities are rigged to lead students to practice specific features of language. More importantly, in real communication speakers also deal with stretches of language above the sentence level. They open the conversation, they take turns, they follow up on what the other participants are saying, they change the topic of conversation at appropriate times, and they bring the conversation to a close.

There are still other artificial aspects to information gap and jigsaw activities (Littlewood, 1981). The range of functional meanings of the language used is rather restricted. For example, communication functions such as greeting, inviting, asking permission, and making offers are not likely to occur. The situations in which the language is used are usually quite contrived and more like games than real communication. How often outside the language classroom do people sort out jumbled sentences or discover differences in pictures? In most practice output activities, the participants' social roles are irrelevant to the performance of the activity. In contrast, communicative output activities permit learners to "experience a wider range of communicative needs in situations more similar to those outside the classroom and under the influence of more varied and clearly defined social conditions" (Littlewood, 1981:39).

Communicative Output Activities

Questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and role plays, are all activities that may be used to create communication in the classroom that approaches communication in real life. These activities may be set up so that the participants discover something that they hadn't known (fill an information gap) and accomplish a desired objective (complete some kind of task). The precise language that is used is often unpredictable, and the participants will have to listen to one another and shape their contributions to suit the evolving communication situation. These communicative output activities may be designed so that even beginners gain practice in using the language in an ongoing discourse.

Let's look first at questionnaires, surveys, and interviews, three types of communicative output activities that involve asking and answering questions. Students see examples of these in their daily experience outside the classroom. The print and electronic media frequently report on the results of surveys and opinion polls, and every television network has both news and entertainment programming that feature interviews. Thus students will have a general idea of what to expect in these activities and are likely to participate with interest.

An adapted example from Pattison (1987) shows how questionnaires can be done with beginners. The task set for the activity is to find out when most people get up in the morning. To increase student participation, as well as to provide needed language input, the whole class together decides how to ask the question. They also discuss possible answers and, to inject a note of competition into the activity, each student privately writes down a prediction as to which time will prove most common. Organizing themselves into small groups, the students question each other about their wake-up times. In each group, one member is chosen to report back to the whole class, where one student writes on the board the answers from the groups. When the class results are tallied, students can compare the most frequently reported time with their own prediction.

It is easy to design variations on this activity by selecting topics your students are interested in and for which they can manage the language. Some possibilities are favorite sports, numbers of students in various height ranges, most hated foods, most admired actors, etc. You can also provide language input by tying the topic of the questionnaire to the current textbook lesson.

As more questions are added to questionnaires, they begin to look more like surveys. Topics for surveys may thus be somewhat more elaborate forms of the topics you use in questionnaires. Or you may take inspiration from survey topics you find reported in newspapers and magazines or on television. Pattison (1987) suggests a family survey, a topic that is certainly manageable by beginning students. In small groups, students ask one another questions such as: Do you have any brothers or sisters? How many? Are you the oldest/youngest/middle child? In reporting back to the class, students will learn how many oldest children there are, how many only children, how many all-girl families are represented, and the like.

A single survey can generate a lot of student activity. Ur (1981) describes several steps in a survey about television viewing. In small groups, students first brainstorm about the kinds of information they want to collect: how much time people spend watching television, what their favorite programs are, what they think of particular types of programming, and the like. Next, they formulate the precise questions they will ask. Will they use open-ended questions? Multiple choice? Agree/disagree scales? In the third step, the survey is administered; for example, half the groups can interview the other half, then reverse roles. Finally, the small groups reconvene separately, tabulate their results, and prepare a brief report which is then presented to the rest of the class.

Interviews have some of the features of questionnaire activities. The chief difference is that an interview focuses on a single individual, while questionnaires and surveys conclude by aggregating the results for a whole group. As with questionnaires and surveys, before your students begin an interview, you need to be sure that they know and can use the necessary language forms. Klippel (1984) points out that this would include not only the vocabulary and grammar, but also the appropriate ways of asking for clarification, verifying understanding, avoiding a question, hesitating, and similar language functions that are likely to occur in an interview. This language preparation can be done by basing an interview activity on a textbook lesson, by brainstorming likely questions and answers before conducting the interview, or by providing students with sample language forms on cue cards or on the blackboard.

Klippel (1984) describes two different ways of generating questions for an interview. In one technique, each student is provided with an "identity card." The information called for on the identity card may be simple or more elaborate, depending on the proficiency level of the students. For beginning students, there may be just a few categories of information: name, family, hobbies, three things I like, three things I don't like. Each student fills in the identity card with information about himself or herself. Then each student is paired with another and given a blank identity card. The pair interview each other to fill out the blank cards. The identity cards thus play a dual role. They allow students to prepare their answers beforehand and they provide guidelines during the interview.

In a second technique, each student writes down five to ten questions that he or she would like to be asked. The general topic of the questions may be left open, or a topic may be prescribed: for example, travel experiences or reading habits. Students then choose partners, exchange question sheets and interview each other using these questions.

Students can gain a lot of communicative practice by regularly interviewing their classmates. The possible topics for such interviews usually revolve around personal experience: for example, eating out, keeping fit, the worst movie I ever saw. As soon as you feel that your students are ready, you can arrange interviews with visitors. You can lay the groundwork for these interviews by leading your students to brainstorm questions and discussion topics and allowing them the chance to look up any language they think they will need during the interview. It might be a good procedure to assign small groups of students to be in charge of different segments of the interview. As follow-up each group can write a summary of the information obtained in their part of the interview.

When one of the participants in an interview plays the part of another person, it takes on some of the qualities of a role play. Doff (1988) suggests a controlled role play in which one student assumes the part of a character in a written text that the class has shared. The character is interviewed by other members of the class. Here is a sample text that students could work from (Doff, 1988: 235-236):

> If you met 15-year-old Jane Cole in the street, you might not notice anything special about her. But she is no ordinary schoolgirl, because as well as studying hard for her exams, she's training to take part in the European table tennis championship this summer. Jane will be one of the youngest contestants, but those who know her stamina and determination are confident that she will do well. Jane's main problem at the moment is finding time for both table tennis and schoolwork. For the last month, she's been getting up at six every day and doing an hour's table tennis practice before school, and then fitting in another hour in the afternoon.

One student assumes the role of Jane and the others ask her questions about her training, her free time, and so on. They should ask questions that go beyond the text, and the student playing Jane uses her imagination to project herself into Jane's life and provide the answers. This interview-role play can be done as a whole class activity, or the class may be divided into groups, with one student in each group acting the part of Jane. You can use this interview-role play technique several times during a course. All that is needed is a textual source in which there is a clearly depicted main character whose life and experiences may be readily imagined.

Role plays are mini-dramas, usually based on real life situations. Students are assigned roles and put into situations that they may eventually encounter outside the classroom. Because role plays imitate life, the range of language functions that may be used expands considerably. Moreover, the role relationships among the students as they play their parts call for them to practice and develop their sociolinguistic competence. They have to use language that is appropriate to the situation and to the characters. While your students are likely to find role plays a motivating kind of activity, you do have to prepare for them carefully. With adequate preparation, students will be able to launch right into the role play, carry it on with good participation by everyone in the group, and bring it all to a satisfactory conclusion.

The first few times that you do a role play with your students, it may be a good idea to provide them with a script—not a script for a play, with all the lines already written out, but a script in the sense that we used the term earlier—a general description of how the scene will play out. The students may be able to brainstorm the scenario themselves, with a little help from you. At the same time, they can think of the language they may need. For closely guided role plays, students may be given role cards.

An example adapted from Livingstone (1983: 18-23) will show how this preparation may be done. First, the teacher describes the situation:

> The local school district threatens to close your neighborhood school. The building is old and in serious need of repair, and the enrollment has fallen sharply in the last few years. The district office has suggested that the students could be bussed to a newer and much larger school across town. Many parents have protested, and a meeting of parents and teachers is called by the school authorities to discuss the problem.

The roles are: the school superintendent (who chairs the meeting), parents, and teachers.

As a class, the students flesh out some of the details of the situation. Here is what they decide together:

Old School	New School
built in 1923	built in 1995
90 students	600 students
five rooms	fifty rooms (inc. computer lab, art and music studios, etc.)
no special facilities except a small park where students and teachers have lunch, etc.	all the newest equipment, inc. computers and television
used nightly for evening classes and all other community activities	used nightly for evening classes; not used for other community activities

The teacher and students explore the reasons that the school district and superintendent may put forward to support the plan to close the school. What are the disadvantages of staying in the present building? What are the benefits of moving to the newer school? What do the parents think of the plan to close down the school? Do any of them support it? Do the teachers share their views? Can anyone offer an alternative to the plan? This discussion is conducted as much as possible in the target language. If the students lack any bits of language, the teacher may make suggestions, or she may allow the students time later to fill in the gaps.

An alternative to this group exploration of language is to give the students role cards and put them to work in pairs to prepare their roles.

<u>Role 1</u>
You are parents of children at the old school. Decide whether you are for or against the move, and list your arguments. Be prepared to put your opinion clearly and politely, and to counter any arguments against it.

<u>Role 2</u>
You are teachers at the old school. Decide whether you are for or against the move, and list your arguments. Be prepared to give your opinion clearly and politely, and to counter any arguments against it.

<u>Role 3</u>
You are the school superintendent. You must chair the meeting. You must make sure that everyone's views are heard. You yourself are for the move but must appear to remain neutral. Remember to "open" and "close" the meeting.

The students can make notes during their preparation, but they do not write out a dialogue or series of planned speeches. The two students who prepare for the role of the school superintendent may need a little extra help from the teacher on the language formulas used to preside over a meeting.

When the role play begins, the class splits into two groups, each group composed of parents and teachers and presided over by a superintendent. The two groups run their role plays concurrently, with the teacher standing apart and discreetly eavesdropping on the proceedings. She doesn't interrupt the students, but if either of the groups gets stalled, she may throw in a comment or question as if taking the part of a parent or teacher. At the end of an agreed period of time, the groups wind up their meeting, regardless of whether they have reached a natural closure.

There can be two kinds of follow-up on a role play, topical and linguistic. After a role play like the one just described, it would be interesting for each group to report to the other how its meeting went. What arguments were advanced by each side? Was any agreement reached? Which side carried the day? The linguistic follow-up would depend on what the teacher had noted in the way of language problems as she eavesdropped on the proceedings. For example, she might need to make suggestions on appropriate ways of offering an opinion, or of agreeing or disagreeing with an opinion offered by another speaker. She could choose not to say anything about linguistic features for the moment, waiting instead until a later session of practice output activities to work on the relevant forms.

Role plays can be a lot of fun. They can be designed to be performed by students in pairs or for larger groups. They can be only a few exchanges in length, or they may run on for fifteen or twenty minutes. And although the example given here would probably be more appropriate for an intermediate class, very simple role plays may be performed by beginners. They are a valuable addition to language learning activities at any proficiency level.

Conclusion

In the first half of this module we undertook a consciousness raising exercise. We looked at features of spoken language which you know at a subconscious level but which you probably have never given much thought to. We considered the fact that speakers of a language, as they grow up in a speech community, learn how to adjust the characteristics of their speech to fit the situation. Without giving much thought to the process, they take into account the participants in the exchange, their social relationships, the physical setting, the nature of the occasion, the topic under discussion—all in a mental calculus that occurs almost instantaneously.

We looked more closely at some of the characteristics of spoken language, first making a general distinction between transactional talk and interactional talk. We looked at how speakers organize themselves to take turns as they talk, to shift topics of conversation in appropriate ways, and to run through frequently occurring communication scenarios.

This consciousness raising models the way you can help your students become aware of such characteristics in both their native language and the target language. Being conscious of specific features of language behavior will help them to notice similarities and differences between the language or languages they know and the language they are studying. It is an important resource to call on as they learn to use the language.

As you are now aware, your students need to develop several kinds of competence: linguistic, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Although they may not be able to become as communicatively competent as a native speaker of the language in equivalent circumstances, they can learn to use all the language they know at any given time to be as communicatively efficient as possible. You will ensure that their communicative efficiency grows continuously by leading them through both more controlled practice output activities and more lifelike communicative output activities. Learning a language is hard work, but with a balance of practice and communication, it can also be an enjoyable and rewarding experience.

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Suggested Additional Reading

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Chapters 8 and 9 deal with the spoken language, examining the nature of oral communication and suggesting ways to make communication in the classroom more like real life communication.

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Practical information on how to prepare for, supervise, and follow up role plays and how to integrate them into language learning activities.

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Makes the results of research in discourse analysis accessible to the classroom language teacher. Plentiful examples of both spoken and written language illustrate both native speaker and learner productions of discourse.

Nunan, D. (1989). *Designing tasks for the communicative classroom.* Cambridge University Press.

For teachers who want to develop their own tasks (or adapt tasks in published materials) for the teaching of speaking skills (as well as the skills of listening, reading, and writing).

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Chapter 6 treats the developing of oral proficiency from the perspective of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.*

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