NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE TEACHING OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE.
A TYPOLOGY FOR THE CLASSIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF ORAL TASKS[1]

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present a taxonomy of spoken language activities which may help teachers decide those which are the most suitable to their teaching and learning context. After discussing the nature of oral language and the difficulties it entails for learners, we will propose a categorization of spoken language activities taking into account, among other features, the five qualitative aspects of spoken language interaction as defined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, hereafter) document (range, accuracy, fluency, interaction and coherence). Examples of activities within each category are also presented so that teachers can understand how this categorization works. It is our intention to apply an innovative perspective to ordinary tasks.

Keywords: spoken language, taxonomy, activities, CEFR, English language teaching.

1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present paper is to present a taxonomy of spoken language activities which may help teachers decide those which are the most suitable to their teaching and learning context. In order to do so, we will first discuss the greatest differences between written and spoken language, the importance of the latter in the teaching of English, and the difficulties students must face when learning to speak English. After these preliminaries, we will provide a general overview of different taxonomies which have been proposed in the literature. This will make the way for the core section of the paper, in which our own categorization of spoken language activities is proposed and where we also show how it works.

2. THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE

2.1. Spoken Language vs Written Language

There are great differences between speaking and writing (Cornbleet and Carter, 2001; Biber et *al.*, 2002). To begin with, writing is pre-planned, and therefore it involves a more careful organisation (complex structures included). Moreover, it is permanent. On the other hand, speech is more transient and rapid and usually involves thinking on the spot. Consequently, it contains simpler constructions

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(even uncompleted sentences), discourse markers such as *um* and *er,* repetitions and rephrasing. All these features make them very different modes of communications.

In this article, we are going to focus on the speaking side of the English language and on the types of activities teachers could use to practise it in class.

2.2. Difficulties in the learning of spoken language

Speaking is not as easy as it may seem at first sight. In fact, it is a complex skill which involves both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. Here is a summary, as expressed by Brown (2001: 270-271).

As for the intrinsic problems, we can highlight the following: speech is fluent and, therefore, students have to learn to group words. Also, spoken language can be colloquial and therefore students have to get familiar with informal words and reduced forms, such as contractions, elisions or reduced vowels. In addition, they also have to learn how to hesitate, make a pause, backtrack, correct themselves or use fillers. Last but not least, they have to become familiar with all sort of difficult phonological aspects.

As for the extrinsic factors, speaking needs practice and students' inhibition and lack of motivation may affect negatively their learning process. In any case, we must recognize that it is very difficult for language practitioners to plan oral activities, since they take a lot of time and groups are usually too large to give individual opportunities to talk.

3. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The speaking skill has been gaining ground from the late 1970s onwards and, actually, several communicative competence *models* have been proposed ever since. One of the most relevant approaches is Communicative language teaching, where interaction is a key element.

Nowadays, teachers cannot conceive language teaching without speaking practice and/or oral tasks. As a result of this increasing interest in speaking, many experts have devoted their efforts to compile and classify a great amount of oral activities so that they can be used in class.

Broadly speaking, most of the oral tasks categorizations put forward in the literature so far can be divided into two mainstreams.

On the one hand, we can find the ones that believe in the existence of a continuum that teachers must take into account when teaching conversation (Nolasco & Arthur, 1987; Harmer, 1991; Littlewood, 1992; Thornbury, 2005). This means that, while developing the speaking skill, students must start by practising the language with some introductory activities which require some specific language knowledge and advance later on towards the interaction activities where they actually engage in conversations. In this way, students move slowly but steadily towards a full communicative competence.

On the other hand, there exist some other typologies like those specified in Ur (1997) and Bygate (2001) which categorize speaking activities according to the aim of the task, what it involves (if it requires to do a project, to get or to organize some information).

When analysing the taxonomies proposed by these authors, we came to the conclusion that a more practical typology might be of good help for teachers. Although these authors have provided us with valuable information and useful activities to promote speaking practice in the EFL classroom, we noticed some ambiguities in certain categorizations. Consequently, we felt the need to unify all those criteria, as will be seen in section four of this paper.

4. OUR PROPOSAL

    4.1. Justification and purpose

Despite the existence of a wide number of speaking activities, teachers admit having great difficulties when looking for exercises which prompt students to talk. As a response to those problems, and as a way to distinguish among the different types of oral tasks, we have attempted to create our own classification.

The ultimate goal of this novel categorization is to help teachers choose the most suitable activities for each learning situation. In order to show its functioning, we will offer an example and show how it is suitable for different levels of linguistic competence.

    4.2. The classification

Our classification tries to systematize the wide range of spoken activities into a group of categories, which we will call *macro-categories*. These macro-categories will group together the activities that share the same learning objectives in terms of the kind of performance that is expected from the students. These macro-categories are: *drama type activities, information-gaps, monologues,* activities which require an *opinion exchange, questioning or problem-solving, oral drills and brainstorming activities.* At the same time, there are a number of micro-categories which make up each macro-category. The types of activities in the micro-categories have the same learning objective (for this reason they belong to the same macro-type) but take different forms (thus they constitute different micro-categories). For instance, the macro-category of *drama-type activities* has as its aim to get students perform a role. However, there are two micro-categories (types of activities) in which students must perform a role: in *simulations* or in *role-plays*. Besides that, the microcategories have been further analysed taking into account several aspects: the level of competence for which the activity is recommended, the type of practice involved (controlled to free activities), their contribution to the development of conversational skills, the basic materials needed to do these tasks and the typical type of interaction. There follows an example of the analysis of one of those micro-types to give you a general overview of the type of analysis we have carried out.

MACRO CATEGORY	TYPE OF ACTIVITY/ DESCRIPTION	CEFR LEVEL OF COMPETENCE/ RUBRIC	TYPE OF PRACTICE	FOCUS ON CONVERSATION	MATERIALS	TYPE OF INTERACTION
INFORMATION GAP	SPOT THE DIFFERENCE In this activity, students have two different versions of the same picture. Students have to find out the differences through speaking without looking at their partner's photo.	Level A: Find the differences in these three pictures. Use the structure 'there is / there are'.	Controlled	NO	3 pictures	Pairs, Small group
		Level B: Find the differences of this actor/actress in these different films.	Semi-controlled	NO	Pictures of the same actor/actress in different films.	Pairs, small groups
		Level C: Find the differences between these two cars.	Semi-controlled	NO	Pictures of two different cars	Pairs, small groups

Table 2. Analysis of a micro-category: *Spot the Difference*

(within the *Information Gap* macro-category)

As you can see above, broadly speaking, we refer to three different types of practice: controlled, semi-controlled and free production (similar to Littlewood, 1992:83).

Controlled activities aim at helping pupils learn particular language forms, without actually requiring them to perform communicative acts. They focus on accuracy and they imply controlled practice in order to get a fairly good command of the linguistic system. The main objective is to produce acceptable linguistic structures and set expressions.

Semi-controlled activities are those ones that somewhat create links between language forms that have been learnt and their functions -in a quite controlled context.

Free production activities stress the communication of meaning and fluency. Their main objective is that learners are able to use language as effectively as possible in real-like situations. Besides, we have included a fourth dimension named 'focus on conversation features', which describes those characteristics that typically occur during a verbal exchange. Thornbury (2005:8-9) calls them managing talk and they include turn-taking, communication strategies, interaction and paralinguistics. By paying attention to these aspects, students increase their sensitivity to the way real conversations work.

4.2.1 Macro-categories

After clarifying these concepts, it seems necessary to move on to a more detailed description of each of the macro-categories. In this description, we also allude to the contribution of these speaking activities to the development of the *five qualitative aspects of spoken language use*[2] contained in the CEFR (2001: 28-29). The types of activities included in them (or *micro-categories*) appear in brackets.

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[2] The main descriptors for the five qualitative aspects of spoken language use as described in the CEFR are:
Range refers to the repertoire of words and command of idiomatic expressions;
Accuracy alludes to the degree of grammatical control;
Fluency represents learners' capacity to deliver information quickly;
Interaction is the capacity of communicating with others; and,

1) Brainstorming activities. (Associations)

These activities are very useful preparation for students before engaging in a discussion. Their main aim is to activate students' previous knowledge on a certain topic. As regards the five qualitative aspects of spoken language use, the activities in this category are thought to promote range. Considering the type of practice involved, they are quite controlled and they do not seem to promote the development of the typical features of natural conversation.

2) Drama-type activities. (Role-plays, simulation)

The label of this category can be seen as a general term encompassing role-plays and simulations. Both activities are based on the idea of acting in a particular role. While 'role –plays' involve the adoption of another 'persona', students act as themselves in a simulation. In this way, they have the opportunity to behave in situations they are likely to encounter when using English in the real world. These two drama-type activities allow the teacher to decide on which type of practice, ranging from controlled to free-production, they want to promote. On the other hand, they contribute to the development of conversational skills and are suitable to develop students' fluency and interaction.

3) Information gap activities. (Guessing games, spot the difference, picture description)

In this type of activities, there is a knowledge gap between students which can only be bridged by using language. Learners have to interact and exchange the information they have in order to achieve the task outcome. Sometimes this exchange of information is simple and mainly consists of fairly predictable sequences of language. However, the type of practice in this task might range from quite controlled to a free-production activity depending on the aim that the teacher has in mind. In terms of the focus on conversation aspects, they are not promoted. As for the five qualitative elements of spoken language, we consider that information-gap tasks help to improve accuracy and range.

4) Monologues. (Presentations, Story telling, Show and tell)

As regards these activities, students have to stand in front of their classmates and speak for a sustained period of time. In terms of practice, they belong to the free-production category. As far as the qualitative aspects are concerned, it seems that they differ depending on the micro-category chosen. Thus, accuracy, range and coherence are fostered in presentations since information has to be given in a logical order, using the appropriate vocabulary and being correct. In contrast, *story telling* and *show and tell* activities (where learners recount stories or their own perceptions) promote coherence and fluency because we believe that ideas have to be expressed in order, at a reasonable pace and without significant breaks in the communication flow.

5) Opinion exchange. (Discussions, Debates)

In these activities, the main component is the active contribution of learners with personal opinions that cannot be predicted beforehand. In terms of practice, they are also free-production activities which

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Coherence involves using connectors and creating a coherent and cohesive discourse.

aim at the communication of meaning. As regards the qualitative aspects in the CEFR (2001), the five of them are promoted, since they involve being accurate, fluent, interactive, coherent and having a wide range of vocabulary.

6) Questioning activities. (Interviews, surveys and questionnaires)

These communicative activities make students ask and answer different questions based on a topic. They can range from controlled to free practice depending on the way the teacher puts them into action. Out of the three micro-categories, only interviews contribute to the development of conversational skills. The aspects of spoken language that are demanded here are interaction and fluency -in the case of interviews- and accuracy and range for questionnaires and surveys.

7) Problem-solving activities. (Planning activities, survival games)

In these activities, there is a problem to be solved; this problem itself is what ultimately creates a communicative purpose. Students are presented with a problem and they must plan or decide the best solution to disentangle it. They are free-production activities which promote coherence, fluency, interaction.

8) Oral drills.

These activities involve repetitive practice of language items in conditions where the possibility of making mistakes is minimized. They typically take the form of imitating and repeating words, phrases, and even whole utterances. As explained by Thornbury (2005:64), they may be a useful 'noticing' technique, and they also provide a means of gaining articulatory control over language. In this sense 'drilling' is a fluency-enhancing technique. This contrasts with the traditional view that drilling is primarily aimed at developing accuracy.

On the one hand, oral drills are somehow controlled activities; on the other, they enhance not only accuracy but also fluency.

4.3   How does our classification work?

After having set the boundaries of our 8 macro-categories, we will go deeper into them and show the functioning of the classification proposed.

As a way of illustration, we are going to show how one speaking activity (*Spot the Difference*, in this case) within the *Information-Gap* macro-category is analysed according to the aforementioned parameters.

- RUBRIC: In groups of three, each student receives one picture that they must hide from each other, and students try to find out the differences between these three pictures of the same actor by asking questions. Then, as a follow-up, they try to guess the titles of the films behind those characters.

- MACRO-CATEGORY: *Information Gap.*

- MICRO-CATEGORY: *Spot the Difference.*

- CEFR DESCRIPTOR OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE USE: Accuracy and range.

- LEVEL OF COMPETENCE: B

- TYPE OF PRACTICE: Semi-controlled. The language students are required to use in this activity is somewhat predetermined by the teacher.

- FOCUS ON CONVERSATION: No. Although students must use some conversation rules (turn-taking, interrupting), we think it is a form-focused activity which aims at reproducing certain patterns of language.

- TYPE OF INTERACTION: Small groups of three people.

- MATERIALS: Pictures of the same actor/actress in different films.

5. CONCLUSION

We would like to conclude this paper by summarizing the advantages of a classification like the one proposed in this paper. This taxonomy intends to help language practitioners develop their students' speaking skill. The underlying motivation for the creation of this categorization is somehow satisfied with our proposal because of several reasons:

First, it registers different activities and defines them according to different features. In this way, teachers can see the wide variety of oral activities they can choose from to use in their classrooms. It is our hope that this classification will be of help for practitioners -especially for those who are new in the profession.

During the elaboration process of this classification, we have realized how complex the spoken language is and how it affects its teaching and learning.

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APPENDIX

MACRO-CATEGORIES	DEFINING FEATURES	MICRO-CATEGORIES
DRAMA-TYPE ACTIVITIES	Learners have to play the role of someone else or act as themselves in a given situation.	ROLE-PLAY
		SIMULATION
INFORMATION GAP	Learners have to share their pieces of information in order to complete a task.	GUESSING GAMES
		SPOT THE DIFFERENCE
		PICTURE DESCRIPTION
MONOLOGUES	Unidirectional form of expression by which learners explain/describe something to their mates.	PRESENTATIONS
		STORY TELLING
		SHOW AND TELL
OPINION EXCHANGE	Learners give opinions which might not be shared by the others.	DISCUSSIONS
		DEBATES
QUESTIONING	Learners ask questions to obtain information from their mates.	INTERVIEW
		QUESTIONNAIRES/ SURVEYS
PROBLEM-SOLVING ACTIVITIES	Learners are asked to give solutions to a specific problem.	PLANNING ACTIVITIES
		SURVIVAL GAMES
ORAL DRILLS	Learners practice sounds or sentence patterns by repeating a model.	REPETITIONS
BRAINSTORMING ACTIVITIES	Learners come up with different ideas on a topic freely and spontaneously.	ASSOCIATIONS

Table 1. Macro-categories and micro-categories in our classification.