

# Helping learners become successful users of english

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20  
Cinzontle

The new course programme of the BA in Modern Languages of the Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco has been in effect for almost five years. The first generation of this programme is now in the ninth academic period. One of the requirements for the students is that they must take eight English subjects. Having taken more English subjects than the students enrolled in the former programme, those in the new programme are expected to be more competent users of English. However, the reality falls short of our expectation. Many are having a hard time getting a grip on how English works, are not able to cope with simple conversations in class, and eventually need to retake the subjects.

Then, what do they need to learn to be able to communicate better in English? Most of the learners and many of us teachers focus on accurate grammar, large vocabulary and good pronunciation. Nevertheless, our experiences as language learners have taught us that there are more than those elements to be learned. We know students who can easily obtain full marks in written exams are not necessarily effective users of English. Those who

are good at performing scripted conversations in class often cannot cope with real interaction outside the classroom.

Another interesting piece of evidence to support the idea that more than vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are needed to be successful language users is how children communicate with scarce language resources. It is reported that twelve-month-old babies begin to speak one word or two after a period of cooing, gurgling and babbling. By the age of two, they produce at least fifty words (Lightbown and Spada 1999). With only that number of words and without producing complete utterances, they participate in conversations successfully and manage to obtain what they need.

If our students know more words than two-year-old babies, have knowledge about English grammar and are equipped with acceptable pronunciation, what makes them refrain from becoming good users of English? In this article I would like to respond to this question.

Gass and Selinker (1994: 182 in Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000: 2) explain that in order to be able to use language we must learn “the appropriate way to use” those

elements of language such as pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. According to Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: 3), it is skills and strategies that enable us to use the language effectively and appropriately. The latter (2000: 175) also claim that:

*In order to be able to speak in another language and make oneself understood, it is usually not necessary to reach a perfect level of competence and control. In fact, people can communicate orally with very little linguistic knowledge when they make good use of pragmatic and sociocultural factors.*

So Celce-Murcia and Olshtain give me two clues to consider in order to respond to the question posed previously: pragmatic competence and skills and strategies. Pragmatics studies the relationship between linguistic forms and human beings who use them. As such, it is concerned with how people achieve their intentions using language, considering contexts and situations within which the language is used (Yule 1996: 4). Pragmatic competence makes conventional, culturally appropriate, and socially acceptable

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ways of interacting possible (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000: 20).

It is necessary to understand that by producing an utterance, we perform an action, such as apology, complaint, compliment, invitation, promise, request, etc. This is the basic idea of speech act theory. The utterance “*Can you pass the salt?*” takes the form of an enquiry about the hearer’s ability to pass the salt. However, the speaker’s intention is requesting the hearer to perform an action, which is to pass the salt. Here, the concepts of form and function become useful. The form “*Can you pass the salt?*” is used for the function of requesting the hearer to pass the salt.

Linguistic forms and functions are not in a one-to-one relationship. One linguistic form can be used to achieve more than one action and one action can be achieved by means of many different linguistic forms. As an example of the first case, we

can consider the same thing said in two different contexts. Two people, Pat and Chris, are getting to know each other on a first date. If Chris says to Pat at the end of the evening, “I like you a lot”, Pat will likely feel good about the situation. However, in another context where Pat and Chris have been dating for some weeks, and Pat asks, “Do you love me?”, if Chris says, “I like you a lot,” the reaction will likely be quite different, as Chris’ statement is taken as a negative answer. So one utterance can convey two very different messages owing to the context in which they are used.

An example of the second case, in which one action can be achieved by means of more than one linguistic form, is when we want to thank someone. We may simply say “Cheers” to our friends. Or we can use more formal expressions; for example: “Many thanks”, “Thank you very much indeed”, “I’m extremely

obliged”, and “I really can’t thank you enough.”

The selection of which form to use depends on the speaker and the contextual factors, such as whom the speaker is addressing; where they are; why they are talking; what they are talking about. Therefore, for Arndt, Harvey and Nuttall (2000: 55), the most crucial part of language learning is learning about links between forms and functions; that is, learning how to make choices and combine words to fulfill specific purposes.

Pragmatics, then, offers one clue to help our students to improve their oral production. The skills and strategies Celce-Murcia and Olshtain highlighted above provide the second clue, as illustrated by the following conversation between a boy, Mark, and his mother. Mark is looking in a mirror and sees reflections of himself and his mother.

1.	Mark: Mummy (v)	
2.	Mummy	
3.		Mother: What?
4.	Mark: There – there Mark	
5.		Mother: Is that Mark?
6.	Mark: Mummy	
7.		Mother: Mm
8.	Mark: Mummy	
9.		Mother: Yes that’s Mummy
10.	Mark:	
11.	Mummy	
12.	Mummy (v)	
13.		Mother: Mm
14.	Mark: There Mummy	
15.	Mummy (v)	
16.	There. Mark there.	
17.		Mother: Look at Helen
18.		She’s going to sleep (long pause)

## 22

## Cinzontle

Although Mark's language is highly limited, in terms of interaction, this conversation is remarkably similar to ordinary conversations because the two people involved take turns appropriately and maintain a particular conversational topic over several turns. So it can be said that being able to take turns and develop a conversation around one topic are necessary to make communication flow. Turn-taking as well as topic selection and change are called discourse strategies (Nunan, 1993: 102). Besides having acquired two strategies, Mark can initiate an interaction and draw his mother's attention to what is of interest. The skills to perform these intentions are also necessary to carry on a conversation.

What cannot be underestimated is the work Mark's mother does as an interlocutor. She is not a simple listener, but she interprets Mark's utterances to ensure that the interaction keeps going. Rarely do adults as expert users of a language ignore children due to their limited mastery of language but verify their understanding through clarification requests and confirmation checks in order to achieve a conversation collaboratively. This mutual effort of making a conversation flow is also observed between adults.

Proficient users, like Mark's mother, employ both their language and pragmatic knowledge whenever they speak, but they may not be good at reflective 'knowing' (McCarthy, 1998: 21-22); in other words, they can use the language without being conscious of how. The language teachers' task is becoming a reflective knower, who is able to bridge the gap between how people really create oral interaction and classroom practices which enable their students to be competent users of the language.

Several questions come to my mind when dealing with skills and strategies required to carry out oral interaction. Can my students initiate

an interaction? Can they draw people's attention to what they want to talk about? Can they take turns and develop conversations around one topic? Can they be collaborative interlocutors to keep the conversation flowing? Unfortunately, typical interaction my students experience in the classroom does not offer possibilities to develop these skills and strategies. In fact, Sinclair and Coulthard (1975 in Nunan 1993) explain that the recurrent pattern of interaction in most language classrooms is made of three moves: "the initiation from the teacher, the response from the students, and the follow-up, which is the teacher's comment on the pupil's answer". Teachers initiate the interaction, usually by asking a question to which they know the answer, one or more of the students respond, and the teachers provide some sort of evaluation of the response. So it is teachers who initiate the three-turn interaction; there is no possibility for students to take more turns and develop the topic over those turns. Students do not initiate or draw the teacher's attention, they are addressed to. Neither do they learn to create conversations collaboratively.

This lack of practice in developing skills and strategies leads us to the necessity of supplementing our class with certain activities that focus on pragmatic competence and discourse skills and strategies. If pragmatic knowledge is a key to becoming a successful user of English, we teachers need to create learning opportunities in which students are allowed to use language in context, where the speaker and the interlocutor(s) are clearly identified and language is used to achieve communicative purposes. In other words, language use has to take place in a more natural and realistic situation.

We should recognise the significance of starting a lesson with small talk dealing with topics and

events in our students' lives. This interaction can be considered as genuine communication. People involved are interested in knowing what happened and negotiate meaning to grasp the idea of the events. Harris and Cadrath (1998: 188) call this spontaneous use of language 'unplanned classroom language' because the teacher has not planned what to say previously but it is generated on the spot.

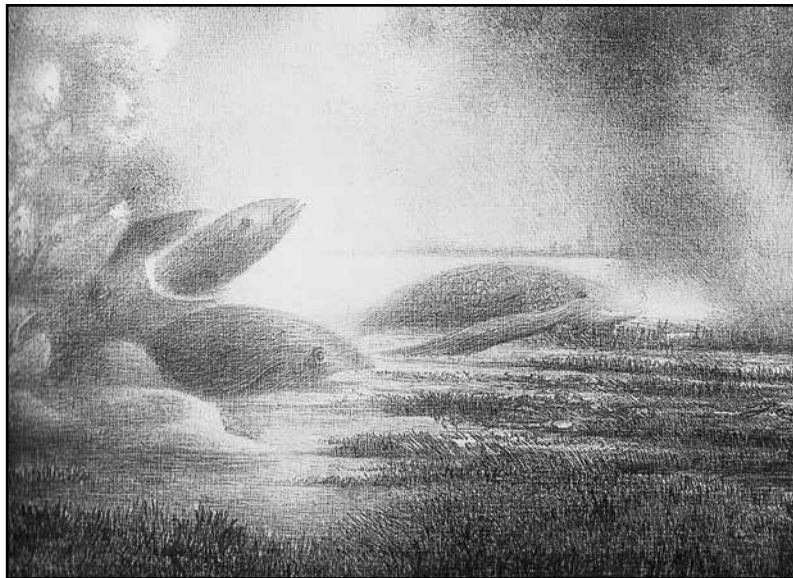
What is worth bearing in mind when we deal with spontaneous talk is not to force our students to talk only with perfectly structured language. This is because spoken language has its own grammar (McCarthy and Carter 1995). Spoken language is much less structured than written language and made up of unfinished utterances and sequence of phrases. It contains repetitions and pauses as well as prefabricated fillers, such as "well", "you know" and "if you see what I mean". Therefore, we could accept unfinished utterances and fillers as part of language resources our students would use instead of overemphasising textbook grammar, which is strongly influenced by written language.

Another contribution teachers can make to promote students' oral production in 'unplanned classroom language' is to take advantage of the opportunities for negotiation of meaning. According to Musumeci (1996 in Garton 2002: 51), teachers rarely insist that learners make their messages comprehensible. Instead, they usually either do their best to understand or abandon the interaction. However, learners must be pushed into making their meanings clear with the use of clarification requests and comprehension checks. This encouragement is likely to help learners to improve accuracy (Ellis 1993: 8 in Garton 2002: 51) since the latter are forced to attend to both the form and meaning of their utterances.

Besides 'unplanned classroom language', we can make the most of procedural language in order to create more natural interaction in the classroom. Procedural language is what the teacher uses to organise and prepare the students. It is indispensable to keep the class moving, though it does not have to do with the content of the course. Many teachers tend to switch to Spanish when they are not dealing with the planned part of class. This code switching has double negative effects on our students' learning. It makes them think English is only for talking about grammar and, even worse, it makes students and teachers miss genuine communicative opportunities.

We also need to provide our students with classroom activities which permit them to interact in naturalistic settings. So it is worth considering the use of task-based learning and project work where students are encouraged to cooperate, negotiate meaning and make decisions to achieve a common purpose. Students use English because they need to clarify what is expected to be done, come to an agreement on how they will achieve the goal, and use the target language to do so. Therefore, students experience varied forms of interaction in which they can use discourse strategies, such as selecting, developing and changing topics by taking turns.

We should consciously stress how to cope with speaking tasks in our teaching. If we plan to ask our students to do a presentation, we have to teach how. A presentation is not made of only the content of the talk. Considering generic features of a presentation, students need to know how to start the presentation, state the topic, move on to the next, summarise what has been said, and finish the presentation. First, we teachers as reflective knowers should learn what makes a good presentation. Then we need to



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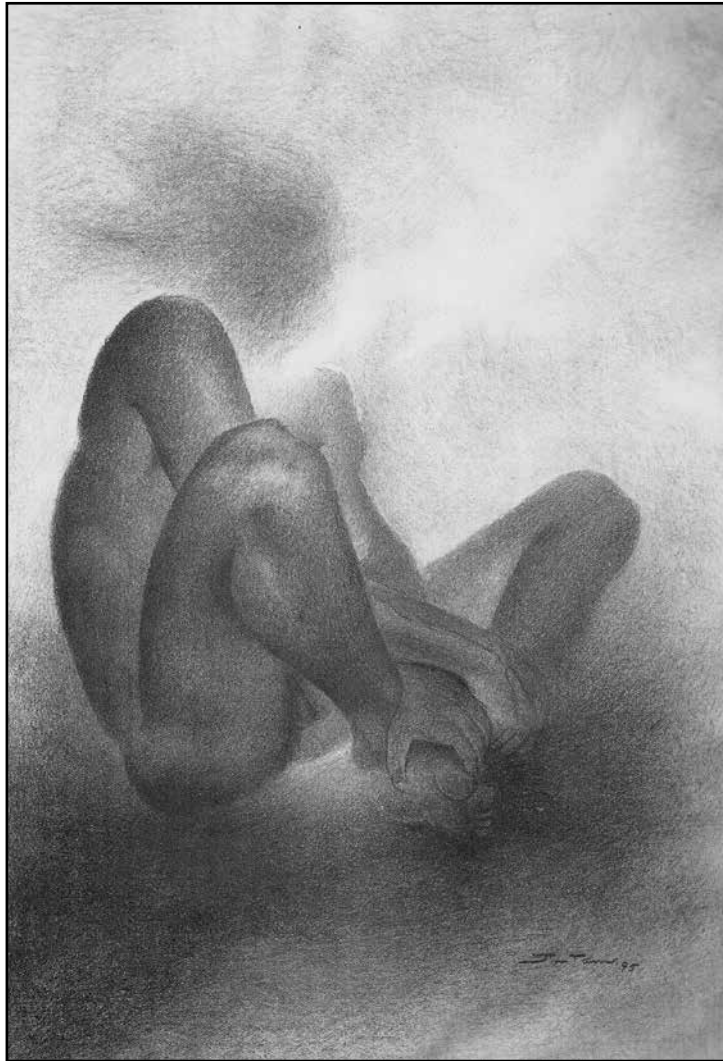
turn that knowledge into activities which will enable students to cope with the task.

Storytelling is a very common day-to-day interaction and so our students need to become capable of doing it. Again, it is not enough for teachers to tell the students to talk about their experiences. Conversational storytelling entails more than narrating facts; in other words it has got its own particular generic features. Jones (2001: 156) explains that it involves "the type of anecdote in which some small crisis or misfortune results in embarrassment, humiliation, or frustration for the protagonist." He elaborates (ibid) that it is structured with five stages and proposes an activity to have language learners notice the generic features. We should prepare our students for storytelling not only in terms of what to say but also how to structure the story and what linguistic resources need to be used to achieve the purpose.

Finally, we should promote the use of communicative strategies so our students know how to get by with limited language resources. The more spontaneous oral interaction

is, the more useful these strategies are. For instance, when they do not come up with the exact word they need, they can resort to paraphrase or circumlocution, which is a way to compensate for the lack of expression with a description or exemplification of the target object (Dörnyei and Thurrell 1991: 16). The communicative strategies exist and our students use them efficiently in their own language, but they are hard to notice. That is why they should be taught overtly.

In order to become successful users of English, our students will need both linguistic resources and pragmatic and strategic competence. It can be said that vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation are used to represent what we want to say, while pragmatic competence and discourse skills and strategies function to transmit what we want to say and get things done. In language learning what and how should go together. Teachers, who have the task of helping our students, should have knowledge about how people really create oral interaction, not just from what textbooks dictate but from real language.



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