

CAPITALISING ON STUDENTS' CLASSROOM WORK

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Abstract

This article focuses on a successful attempt of using dialogues produced by students, during various role plays, as a basis for listening activities devised for students with a lower language level. The recorded speaking activity, a simulation of a business meeting, involved well-motivated, upper intermediate students with a good command of spoken English, who produced an interesting dialogue on pollution. This dialogue has later on been used with intermediate level students for practising listening skills and also integrated language skills.

Keywords: listening, language production, speaking, language skills, recorded dialogues, classroom work

Introduction

In the teaching of a foreign language at university level, the three stages of the learning process – *presentation, practice and production* – intermingle permanently, so the teacher has to cope with a fast change of the role they play in the classroom. Being, sometimes within the same class, an informant, a conductor, a monitor, a guide and, most of all, a motivator (Byrne, 1994:25) is the familiar range of roles a language teacher plays regularly. At this stage of individual development, students know their needs well and teachers have to try to meet these needs by useful and attractive activities. Because presentation comes, at variable extent, in most of the language classes, when teachers devise activities for university language courses, they think particularly of the other two stages: practice and production.

In this context, the teachers' attempt to make students use the language both accurately and fluently is amplified by the interest to offer the students frequent opportunities to speak freely, in the way they will do this outside the classroom. So it is at the production stage of learning that students are visibly eager to express themselves as individuals and prove that they are well equipped to communicate adequately. This is perhaps more obvious in ESP classes where, after having got confident with their abilities of mastering the language system, the students want to prove that they are actually able to communicate professionally in an adequate

manner. The students' commitment to work may be high and their demand for opportunities to communicate professionally so strong, that the teacher will be permanently under pressure and in search for new suitable materials. In some cases, teachers may look too far for these materials while the resources they need may be very close to them, in the large amount of classroom work that could be easily exploited.

In what follows, I will show how conversations resulted from students' role-plays may be used successfully as listening materials with the students who have not been involved in the respective role-playing. Many teachers may object to this idea on the grounds that the language produced in such a role-play is somehow imperfect; it may include mistakes and incorrect pronunciation. I do agree with them but this does not diminish the communicative value of the material and its chances to be used in the classroom.

A classroom experiment

First of all, as Rixon (1994:26) stated "English is now an international language, used as a lingua franca between people who do not speak it as a native language. It is thus not the native speaker model that (...) students are likely to hear all the time in the real world." Secondly, it depends on the type of activity we associate with the respective material so that the faulty parts may be neglected by the students. Thirdly, it could be a good opportunity to discuss the mistakes occurring in the conversation in the context of differences between oral and written language thus making students aware of various language registers.

The role-play in the experiment I am referring to has been used for developing speaking skills at upper intermediate level, in a well-established class that, at the time it was planned and devised had no connection with the listening class. The idea of using the resulted material for listening activities came much later, when I was looking for new materials to be used in the classroom.

The role play is based on the text "Social responsibility" from "Keys to Management" by David Cotton, and the role cards given to students illustrate it clearly. However, in the development of the role play the students have used the cards in a very original way that it has led to conversations that hardly reflect the original text (See Appendix).

Below there are the details of the role play as a classroom activity for developing speaking skills:

Situation:

Jane, David and Ann are working in a small chemical manufacturing plant. They have important positions in the company. They are also members of the Administration Board and have just met to discuss a very important point.

Roles:**Jane** – chief executive**David** – production manager**Ann** – chief accountant

Task: *Read your card carefully and be ready to take part in the meeting and act according to the role assigned.*

Cards:**Jane**

You are the chief executive of a new chemical manufacturing plant.

You have just received a letter from the city officials notifying that many citizens have complaint that your plant is polluting the town by fumes, chemical waste, bad smell and other similar things.

They have attached a report indicating pollution levels.

First, discuss the matter with David, your production manager and Ann, the chief accountant.

Show them that you have to find a solution to reduce pollution. If not, you will have to close the most polluting sections.

Whatever the solution, it should reflect your social responsibility.

David

- You are the production manager of a new chemical manufacturing plant.
- The plant has just started and you are happy that people are generally satisfied with their present jobs; you also have good relations with the trade union.
- You know that such a plant may be very polluting and that serious complaints may occur; at the same time, you have noticed that highly positioned people may turn a blind eye if you know how to pull strings.

Ann

- You are the chief accountant of a new chemical manufacturing plant.
- The plant has just started the productive process but you failed to buy the necessary equipment to protect the environment against pollution. You expect the citizens to complain about it one day.
- You have already thought of possible solutions but they are too expensive and take a lot of time to be put into practice.
- Anyway, you intend to discuss with the designing company about it. Perhaps they can make some temporary improvements so that the existing equipment may become less polluting. It would be less expensive for the moment when the profit is still low.

When the plan of the speaking activities for the respective semester was presented to the students, they were told that some groups would be recorded, but they did not know which ones and when it was going to happen.

Though more groups had to do the same role-play, only two of them have been recorded. The group whose conversation I have selected to be used as a listening material was the better of the two recorded on that specific occasion. The quality of the students' performance encouraged me to use the resulted dialogue as a listening material aimed at developing individual and integrated skills such as information prediction, listening + note taking/table filling, listening + speaking + writing. This is also illustrated in the table below, which shows how the lesson was structured:

Stage	Description/ Type of activity	Skill	Type of interaction	Reference
Stage I	Pre-listening tasks	Speaking	Pair-work	Tasks
Stage II	Listening 1 (<i>lines 1-14 in the tape scripts</i>) Prediction	Listening Speaking	Teacher students	Task 2a
Stage III	Listening 2 (<i>lines 1-14 in the tape scripts</i>)	Listening Speaking	Teacher < -> students	Task 2b
Stage IV	Listening 3 (<i>lines 14- to end of the tapescript</i>) While-listening tasks	Listening Writing: Note-taking/ Table filling	Individual work	Tasks 3a and 3b
Stage V	Listening 4 While-listening task	Listening Writing Speaking	Individual work Teacher < - > students	Task 3c
Stage VI	Post-listening tasks Letter writing	Speaking Writing	Group-work	Task 4

The richness of the conversation resulted from the role play gave the teacher the chance to exploit it from various perspectives, making the students detect meanings expressed in different grammatical forms, reconstruct or infer situations, goals, procedures, predict outcomes from events described, identify and reconstruct topics and coherent structures from ongoing discourse involving two or more speakers, infer relationships, deduce meanings of words from contexts, detect the speaker's attitude towards the subject matter. This class experiment has confirmed many of Burgess' suggestions about the use dialogues as listening materials (Burgess *MD346a, Unit 0: 19-20*) and this is what the following activities will try to illustrate.

Pre-listening - Task 1

Work in pairs and discuss about advantages and disadvantages of living in a big city.

Note:

Pollution will be mentioned among the disadvantages of living in a big city. The students will probably come to discuss about possibilities of reducing pollution. They may also suggest organizations responsible for environment protection. Any idea resulted from this brainstorming stage may be fruitfully used later on, in the post-listening activity.

As they work in pairs, the students will be encouraged to check if there are common points among the pairs formed for this activity.

While-listening Tasks**Listening 1 - Task 2a**

You will hear the beginning of the conversation between Jane, David and Ann. Listen to it carefully and try to guess what Jane is going to talk about.

Note:

The listening task 2a may help the students predict the subject. Anyway, this new task is meant to raise the curiosity and the interest to listen to the whole dialogue.

Listening 2 - Task 2b

You will listen to the first section again. The words "well?" and "look" appear in the conversation either independently or in the opening of a reply. Why do the speakers use them? In what way do these terms contribute to the conversation?

Task 2b, in which listening is connected with speaking has been introduced for two reasons:

- 1) to make students aware of the distinction between oral and written language
- 2) to help them understand the characteristics of *interactional communication* as opposed to the *transactional* one (Rixon, 1994: 6).

The third stage of the lesson is supposed to raise the students' awareness concerning the social aspects of interaction. Intuitively, the students will probably feel that certain elements of communication like "well" and "look", are simply used to establish and maintain social contact, which is so important in human communication. The students may be led to discover the *phatic function* of such words. They may be given some general information about this function of language so that they can understand the contribution of the phatic elements to the building of interaction. Without relevant information, the students might be

tempted to label such words simply as "fillers" which would be detrimental to the real conversational value of the items under discussion.

In this specific situation, **well?** uttered with a rising intonation shows that the interlocutor is "on the same wavelength" (Burgess, MD346a, Unit 4:10) with the speaker, meaning "I'm listening to *you*". It has a clear phatic function in the sense given to it by Roman Jakobson (1960: 355). At the same time, when the speaker starts by saying **look**, she wants to draw the listener's attention to what she is going to say, with the intention to make sure that the channel of communication is open.

The students should be helped to understand that, in conversation, the link between interlocutors can be established by words as those referred to before, and maintained by others like **yeah, yes, mm, mhm, you know, I see**. Some of the so-called "maintenance words" may sometimes imply the idea of "shared knowledge" (Burgess, MD346a, Unit 4: 11). Even if they are used to establish or maintain communication, these elements usually contribute to the creation of a "phatic communion" between the interlocutors, as Malinowski (1933: 296-337) suggestively called it. So, Stage III focuses on the development of the students' social competence.

Stages IV-VI, proved to be very productive. Though mainly directed towards listening, these activities have also facilitated the practice and development of other language skills as it can be found by analysing the following activities.

Listening 3 - Tasks 3a & 3b

3a. *While you are listening to the dialogue, identify the causes of complaints and make a list of them.*

3b. *Listen to the tape again and fill in the table below while listening to the dialogue for the second time.*

	Ann	Dave	Jane
Suggestions made			
Acceptable? Yes/No Why?			

Listening 4 - Task 3c

Listen to the dialogue again and identify idioms that mean:

- “to become free of”
- “to solve something”
- “to refuse to see something”
- “to exaggerate”

Post-listening Tasks**Task 4a**

Work in groups of three. Imagine you are members of Jane's team.

- *What other suggestions would you make to solve the situation? Discuss them within your group.*
- *On the basis of your discussion, write the letter Jane should send to Municipality.*

Task 4b

In small groups discuss about the relationships between the persons you have heard and bring arguments to support your ideas.

In general, integrated skills activities need more time to be performed in the classroom than those focusing on one activity only. Therefore, the set of activities suggested above may seem too dense. It depends on the students' level too whether a set like this could be performed in one seminar or more.

Conclusions

The case presented above leads to one main point:

At university level, students' class work may be a reliable resource providing useful materials that can be used by teachers in devising activities for language practice. One needs courage and commitment to work to prove that this is not a questionable statement.

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Appendix

Tape script of dialogue

Jane, Dave and Ann are working in a small chemical manufacturing plant. They have main positions in the Administration Board: Jane - chief executive; Dave - production manager; Ann - chief accountant. They have just met to discuss a very important issue.

- Dave* Hello, Jane. Did you want to see me?
- Jane* Dave, yes...I know you're busy...but...er...it's something...it can't wait.
- Dave* Well?...
- Jane* Just a moment please. I've called Ann, too. She may come any moment. (noise)...Oh, here she is.
- Ann* Hello. I'm sorry I'm a bit late.
- Dave* Hello, Ann.
- Jane* Hello. It's OK. It's not an official meeting... Look, I want to talk with you before I take it officially.
- Ann* What happened? I don't like how it sounds.
- Dave* Yes, is it anything wrong?
- Jane* Yes. I've just received this...er from the city officials.
- Dave* What's [that?
- Ann* [What's th...a report?
- Jane* Complaints. Our plant is causing a lot of pollution.
- Dave* Oh, no. And we've just started.
- Ann* I'm sorry but we can't say we didn't expect it...hm...it's a chemical manufacturing plant. What are they complaining about?
- Jane* You may read yourselves...fumes [.....chemical waste... bad smell...
- Dave* [Hm
- Jane* ...thinks like that... you know...I don't like the tone of this report. We've got to take some steps to get rid of it...to reduce pollution.
- Ann* It'll need a great deal of time and money...
- Jane* Yes, that's true.
- Ann* ...and we can't afford it right now. Our profits are still low.
- Jane* Er... yeah. Well, you see, we have to find a way out of it... or, if not, we have to close the most polluting sections.
- Dave* Jane, but that's crazy...how...how can you say that? There'll be a mess. People [fired...trade union protests [...I really don't like that.
- Jane* [Yeah... [I know...
- Ann* [Mhm...
- Jane* Don't tell me. I don't like it either.

- Ann* Perhaps we can find something...er [...er...
Dave [Wait..wait...Jane, how far have they taken this matter?
Jane I don't know. Well, far enough as you see...Municipality.
Dave Municipality...er...look, I've got an idea [.....I've got an idea... we could
 [try to pull strings with some government officials.
Ann [It's a serious matter.
Jane [Yes...
Jane What do you mean?
Dave To persuade them...you know...to persuade them to turn a blind eye to it.
Ann To turn a blind eye to it. How does it come?
Jane You mean to bribe them? [.....Absolutely not. It's social responsibility,
 Dave.
Ann [Oh!
Dave [Oh, come on, Jane.
Jane W-we cant even think of it
Dave Why not? Others do it quite often and get on well with everything. Hm!
 Social responsibility? Remember what that famous economist said about
 it? Yes, he's famous.....er.....What's his name?...He's got
 the Nobel
Jane [What are...what are you talking about?
Dave Prize for Economics... and his name slips my mind right now...
 [er.....Yes.
Ann [Friedman?
Jane That's it! Friedman... er... was he? Anyway, in his view, business has
 only one responsibility... to increase its profits.
Jane Yes, but within the rules of the game, without deception and fraud.
Dave [Fraud?...Come on, Jane. You always make a mountain out of a molehill.
Ann [Mhm.
Jane It's not that, Dave. Not this time [... you know... it's something we have
 to...
Dave [Ah
Jane ...think of seriously, to get a solution.
Ann I think we should discuss with the designers. [... Perhaps they have some
 [less...
Dave [Ha
Jane [Yes
Ann ...expensive suggestions.
Dave Designers? Less [expensive suggestions? Ann, do you really believe
 that?
Jane [Yes, why not?
Jane Oh...why not? Or...they can make some temporary improvements [any
 ch.....
Dave [Maybe that!
Jane ...any change that may reduce pollution and give us time to think of a

permanent solution.

Ann Meanwhile, we have to answer [this complaint.....as soon as possible.

Jane [Mhm...mhm...yeah.

Dave She's right, Jane.

Jane Yes, that's right..er...er...Dave, er...w-w-will you...will you try to contact the designing company please? [.....As I know you have a friend there...

Dave [OK [oh, no-no-no...not my...

Jane ...might help us to get in touch with the right person easier and sooner.

Dave To use my friend? No way! And it would be fraud!

Jane [Dave!

Ann [(laughs) [.....He-he...yes. He

Dave OK-OK. I'll call him right now. Good bye, everybody!

Jane Thanks. Bye, Dave.

Ann Good bye. (Noise) Oooh! Ifs half an hour left till lunch break.

Jane Oh, so soon?

Ann Don't forget we're going to the Johnson's today on lunch break.

Jane Oh, I'd completely forgotten about that.

Ann How could you? It was your idea.

Jane Yes, but...

Ann No "but". See you later.

Jane OK. See you.

Note: the graphic sign "[" indicates simultaneous speech.