

**THE OUTPUT HYPOTHESIS, THE L2 TEACHER,
AND THE SPEAKING SKILL**
A Hipótese da Produção, o Professor de L2 e a Habilidade Oral

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Abstract

The present article reports on a case study with three L2¹ teachers, the purpose of which was to examine teachers' perspectives towards the speaking skill, types of opportunities provided for speaking the target language in the classroom, and functions of output (Swain, 1985, 1995) mostly emphasized by teachers within the opportunities provided for speaking. Results indicate that teachers tend to view speaking as communication and most opportunities provided for speaking are discussions about familiar topics. Moreover, teachers tend to emphasize the practice function of output.

Key words: *output; speaking; teacher; classroom.*

Resumo

O presente artigo reporta um estudo de caso conduzido com três professores de L2 cujo objetivo foi investigar as perspectivas dos professores em relação à habilidade oral, as oportunidades promovidas para a prática da habilidade oral em sala de aula e as funções da produção (Swain, 1985, 1995) mais enfatizadas pelos professores durante a prática da habilidade oral. Os resultados indicam que os professores vêem a habilidade oral como comunicação e as oportunidades para a prática oral consistem em discussões sobre tópicos familiares. Os resultados também indicam que a função da produção mais enfatizada pelos professores é a função da prática.

Palavras-chave: *produção; habilidade oral; professor; sala de aula.*

¹ In the present study both foreign and second languages will be referred to as L2. Whenever it is important to highlight the learning *context*, I will use the terms foreign language context and/or second language context.

1. Introduction

According to Swain (1985, 1995), output plays a role in language learning. Output encompasses speaking and writing.² As regards speaking, Levelt (1989) claims that speaking is a complex cognitive skill. Schmidt (1992) states that the development of a skilled behavior involves a change from controlled to automatic processes and this change occurs through practice. If a foreign language context is taken into account, learners spend a few years attending classes in order to learn an L2. As far as the development of the speaking skill is concerned, practice happens mainly in the classroom. Thus, the ways teachers promote opportunities for output (speaking) in the classroom may play a role in the development of the speaking skill in a foreign language context.

In order to investigate how speaking is treated by L2 teachers, the present study aims at examining teachers' perspectives towards the speaking skill, the ways teachers provide opportunities for speaking the L2 in the classroom, and the functions of output mostly emphasized by teachers within the opportunities provided for speaking the L2.

In the remaining sections, I shall present a brief review of the literature followed by the method, results, and interpretation.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Models of L1 and L2 speech production

Levelt's (1989) model of L1 speech production has four specialized components: the conceptualizer, the formulator, the articulator, and the speech comprehension system. These components work in a highly automatic way, and automaticity is what allows the components to work in parallel, which is, in turn, "a main condition for the production of uninterrupted speech" (Levelt, 1989:2).

² Although output encompasses speaking and writing, the present study will deal only with speaking.

De Bot (1992) made a few adaptations to Levelt's (1989) model in order to account for L2 speech production. The first assumption of De Bot's (1992) model is that the speaker has to decide what language to speak. This decision takes place in the conceptualizer. As regards the formulator, De Bot (1992) proposes that it is language-specific; thus, different procedures are applied to the grammatical encoding of L1 and L2 speech. Finally, De Bot (1992) suggests only one articulator for both languages. By assuming only one articulator, L1 interferences in L2 can be explained.

2.2. The output hypothesis

Krashen (1981) claims that when output occurs, acquisition has already taken place. On the other hand, Swain (1985, 1995) postulates that output plays a role in *fostering* acquisition³. The function of output in the sense of practicing the language may enhance fluency (Swain, 1985), but not necessarily leads to accuracy (Schmidt, 1992). Hence, besides this more general function of output in the sense of practicing, Swain (1985, 1995) proposes three other functions of output, which are related to accuracy. These functions are the noticing/triggering function, the hypothesis-testing function, and the metalinguistic reflection function.

The noticing/triggering function proposes that as learners need to produce the language in order to achieve communicative goals, they may notice gaps in their interlanguage. In other words, "In producing the target language (vocally or sub vocally) learners may notice a gap between what they *want* to say and what they *can* say, leading them to recognize what they do not know or know only partially" (Swain, 1985:125). Thus, output may lead learners to raise consciousness of what they need to learn about the target language.

The hypothesis-testing function proposes that language production may represent learners' hypotheses about how the target

³ In the present study, no theoretical distinction is made between learning and acquisition; thus, both terms will be used interchangeably.

language functions. It is important to highlight that these hypotheses are implicit, they are not conscious. In this sense, output itself is the hypothesis. Hence, what learners speak may represent their best guesses about how something should be said in the target language (Swain, 1985, 1995).

Swain (1985, 1995) also proposes a third function of output, namely, conscious reflection. This function of output is more related to explicit hypotheses. In this sense, output may also generate *explicit* hypotheses about learning, which may take place as learners communicate *about* the target language in class. Whenever learners engage in communication for the purpose of discussing and reflecting upon how the target language works, output is, then, leading learners to generate explicit hypotheses about the language. In this sense, this third function of output is actually a metalinguistic function.

It is important to highlight that the Output Hypothesis does not deny the relevance of input. It complements and reinforces input-based approaches to language acquisition (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000).

2.3. Output performance

This last section of the review of the literature will focus on two implementation conditions of oral tasks which have shown to promote gains in output performance: pre-task planning (Skehan, 1996, 1998) and task repetition (Bygate, 2001a). Skehan (1996, 1998) claims that fluency, accuracy, and complexity should be the three goals of language learning.⁴ However, these goals compete for learners' limited attentional resources. Pre-task planning and task repetition seem to be conditions in which attentional resources can be allocated among these three goals in a more balanced way.

First, it is important to distinguish planning as a pre-task activity (Skehan, 1996) from the planning stage (conceptualizer) language users

⁴ According to Skehan (1996, 1998), *fluency* is related to the temporal aspects of speech production; *accuracy* is related to grammatical correctness; *complexity* is related to language elaboration (e.g., subordination).

undergo as they generate pre-verbal messages (Levelt, 1989). The former is related to the manipulation of tasks and consists of allowing L2 speakers time to plan what they are going to say *before* they actually carry out a task. It is a kind of metacognitive planning. The latter is related to on-line planning speakers undergo *during* task performance.

Speaking is divided in two types of activities: planning and execution (Clark & Clark, 1977). In L1 speech production, planning is subconscious and highly automatic. Thus, in most situations, L1 speakers have a considerable amount of 'ready-made' plans or chunks available which contributes to reduce the processing load (Mehnert, 1998).

On the other hand, L2 speakers' 'ready-made' plans are more limited and L2 language users need to construct plans in most communicative situations, which means that a high degree of cognitive control is demanded. In this sense, planning as a pre-task activity as proposed by Skehan (1996) may have a positive impact on L2 speech performance for it reduces the amount of on-line planning *during* task performance, thus reducing cognitive load in managing communicative goals. Skehan (1998) claims that planned production can lead to a balance in the goals of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Empirical studies carried out by Mehnert (1998), Foster & Skehan (1996), Ortega (1999) and Kawauchi (2005) have shown that allowing learners to plan their output may lead to gains in performance.

As regards repetition, it has been highlighted in the field of L2 acquisition as an important condition for learning (McLaughlin & Heredia, 1996). Likewise, Schmidt (1992) claims that the development of a skill involves a shift from controlled to automatic processes, and practice is what makes the shift happen. Bygate (2001a) claims that giving learners the opportunity to perform a task a second time leads to gains in performance since it enables them to retrieve crucial information from long-term memory. In a second encounter with a task, learners are more cognitively prepared. Their grammar and vocabulary items are primed by the first time the task was carried out (Bygate & Samuda, 2005). Thus, learners may generate more sophisticated output in their second performance. Empirical studies on task repetition (e.g., Bygate, 2001a; Gass et al, 1999) have shown that repetition leads to gains in output performance.

3. Method

3.1. Research questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are teachers' perspectives towards speaking?
2. In what ways do teachers provide learners' with opportunities for speaking the target language in the classroom?
3. What functions of output tend to be mostly emphasized by teachers within these opportunities provided for speaking the target language in the classroom?

3.2. Participants and context

Three teachers of English as an L2 at the Extracurricular Language Course offered at Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina (UFSC) were the participants of this research. Teachers are identified as Teachers 1, 2, and 3. They are female non-native speakers of English, and they had 5, 20, and 10 years of language teaching experience respectively, at the time of data collection. The classes observed were all from intermediate levels, semesters 5, 4, and 5, and the number of students in each class was 13, 10, and 12, respectively for these three teachers.

3.3. Procedures

The data for the present work were collected through class observation and semi-guided interviews. Twelve classes were observed, four of each teacher. First, classes were audio recorded and field notes were taken on a diary. Second, interview sessions were carried out for the purpose of data triangulation. Finally, classes and interviews were transcribed for further analysis.

3.4. Conventions on class transcriptions

The following conventions were used on class transcriptions:

T- teacher

L1, L2 –identified learners

L –unidentified learner

LL – unidentified learners talking at the same time

(...) pauses

italic – emphasis

XXX-inaudible

(())- comments made by the present researcher

[] –overlapping speech

4. Results and discussion

The most relevant data from the observed classes provided the following overall picture of the participants of the present study concerning their perspectives towards speaking, the opportunities provided for speaking in the classroom, and the functions of output mostly emphasized within these opportunities.

The teachers observed presented a similar approach concerning the opportunities provided for speaking in the classroom. A variety of opportunities for speaking is given by these teachers: socializing, correcting exercises, discussing topics, and making up dialogues. Thus, speaking seems to be a vehicle to achieve several other goals, and most of what is accomplished in the classroom happens through speaking.

Teacher 1 seems to provide several types of opportunities for speaking in the classroom; she is always trying to develop conversations with her students throughout her classes. In addition to this, whenever speaking itself seems to be the goal, it is motivated through discussions about topics which are usually suggested by the book.

An opportunity for speaking which does not seem to have language production itself as the goal, but rather as a way of interacting with the students is illustrated in excerpt 1. Before correcting the workbook exercises, Teacher 1 asks questions about students' feelings concerning the exercises assigned.

EXCERPT 1:

6. T: Not very happy, not so excited about these exercises, but (...) I mean, were the exercises difficult?
7. L2: Well (...) I think (...) they were a little so difficult that the student's book
8. T: Student's book? What? ((The teacher does not seem to hear the student very well))
9. L2: So difficult that the student's book, teacher
10. T: Oh, they *were more difficult* than the student's book.
11. L2: Ah (...) More than! *A little* (...) A little more difficult than the student's book

As it can be seen, the teacher is not pushing students to accomplish any task or to produce any specific type of language form. She just seems to be interacting with her students through conversation. In lines 7 and 9, L2 presents grammatical problems concerning the use of the comparative form. It is important to highlight that the learner did not ask any questions concerning the comparative form. L2 simply uses the form; hence, this may be an indication of the hypothesis-testing function of output (Swain, 1985, 1995). Thus, the learner's output itself may represent learner's best guess at how to use the comparative form in order to convey his opinion about the exercise. The teacher provides negative evidence by uttering the correct use of the comparative form which, in turn, seems to be perceived by the learner, who restates the sentence correctly. As it has been aforementioned, whenever Teacher 1's goal seems to be speaking, such opportunities are provided by promoting discussions around topics. These discussions are motivated by many questions mainly coming from the teacher, as it can be seen in the following excerpts.

Teacher 1 promotes a discussion on the topic suggested by the book unit.

EXCERPT 2:

338. T: OK. In pairs please, I'd like you to list at least five (...) jobs that you think are hot in Brazil. You know hot? Hot jobs!! What, what is a (...) hot job? A hot job, a hot work
339. L: A cool job?
340. T: A cool job in what sense?
341. L: cool, hot ((laughing))
342. T: What ?((laughing)) What do you have in mind when I say hot job?
343. L: A nice job.
344. L1: Perigoso, teacher?
345. T: [A dangerous job?]
346. L1: [Yes, a dangerous job]

Teacher 1 works on making students keep talking about hot jobs, which is the topic of the book unit. She starts by asking questions; then, she asks learners to work in pairs. The first moment is a very open and flexible type of speaking activity, since no specific procedures are required: she just makes learners answer questions and give their opinions. During this first moment, as the discussion unfolds, learners seem to notice gaps in their knowledge, which seems to characterize the noticing gap function of output (Swain, 1985, 1995). In line 344, while L1 is trying to convey meaning about hot jobs, the learner realizes that he lacks the vocabulary knowledge he needs in order to communicate. Therefore, the learner tries to solve this problem by asking the teacher about it. Other instances as such can be illustrated in the next excerpt. After asking students to write a list of jobs they consider hot, the teacher asks them to share their answers.

EXCERPT 3:

347. T: Have you finished? Come on, let's share our ideas about hot jobs! Which ones do you consider hot jobs?
348. L 6: [Adrenaline?]
349. T: Oh, you're explaining the meaning of hot job.((the teacher realizes that some students misunderstood the exercise and gave definitions for hot jobs besides writing a list))
350. T: Ok, guys. There are many conversations going on at the same time. Do you think that's possible? So, the girls here are explaining what is a hot job for them, listen. Go ahead.
351. L6: For me a hot job is when you have emotions and adrenaline and you (...) get a good money or something illegal
352. L6: Illegal
353. T: Oh, *illegal? You think illegal is hot?*
354. L6: Maybe
355. T: So, Ok the girls explained their ideas about hot jobs. These two things they said, a job that provides some emotion, maybe dangerous and makes you take risks all the time and illegal jobs. Ok, now tell us which ones you listed
356. L6: Drugs jobs? People who work with drugs? How we say in English?
357. T: Oh, you mean *drug dealer*.
358. L6: Drug dealer, Barman.
359. T: Ok, how about you guys? Is it necessary to explain the meaning of hot jobs?
360. L9: A hot job (...) It change you a reference
361. T: Oh, *it makes* you a reference, you are the reference in that profession, *it makes* you a reference.
362. L9: Like a teacher could be
363. T: Sure, it *is* a hot profession.

Again, in this excerpt, it can be seen that learners notice gaps in their knowledge, which exemplifies the noticing gap function of output (Swain, 1985, 1995). Learners try to solve such problem by asking the teacher about it. In line 357, L6 tries to solve this problem by explaining the meaning of the word for the job they want to write on their list; then, the learner explicitly asks the teacher for help. In addition to this, in line 361, L9 presents linguistic problems when trying to get the message across. It does not seem that the learner notices a linguistic problem since he does not hesitate or ask for help. Hence, this may suggest that such utterance is the learner's best guess at how the sentence should be said. It may be an indication of the hypothesis-testing function of output (Swain, 1985, 1995). Teacher 1 provides negative evidence about the student's linguistic problem by saying the sentence correctly twice. However, it is not possible to state that noticing might have taken place from the part of the learner for he simply goes on talking without restating the sentence or giving any other cues which might indicate noticing has occurred.

It is important to highlight that Teacher 1 sometimes waits until the discussions are over and goes to the board to emphasize the most common mistakes students make. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

EXCERPT 4:

T: Class, you are making some mistakes ((teacher goes to the board))
 (...) Look, we don't say: this job is *a* hot, Ok? Also, no 'the' before
 my

This may indicate that Teacher 1 does so as a way not to interrupt learners while they talk. However, she considers explicit feedback to be relevant.

Teacher 2 also gives several opportunities for speaking in the classroom. The following excerpts illustrate this feature. The teacher talks to students about their holidays:

EXCERPT 1:

121. T: So, how was Easter? Did you eat lots of chocolate eggs?
122. L1: Yes, teacher
123. T: Are you happy, then?
124. L2: happy? Tired, teacher
125. T: Tired of eating chocolate?

As can be seen, the teacher is socializing with students. It does not seem that she has any specific objective in mind when asking these questions. Speaking here does not seem to be the goal the teacher has in mind. Rather, speaking, at this moment, seems to be the means of communication between the teacher and the students.

Whenever speaking seems to be the goal, Teacher 2 seems to propose debates, discussions around topics. This can be seen in the following excerpt:

EXCERPT 2:

1. T: Do you remember when this war started?
2. L1: [March, 17th]
3. LL: [March 17th]
4. T: March 17th (...) Ok (...) what (...) what do you consider this event? A tragedy? Uh (...) A good thing? What do you think it is?
5. L1: Depends the point (...)
6. T: Ok, depends on which point of view? ((teacher does not emphasize her correction towards what the student had just tried to say)) In your point of view, what is it?
7. L1: Stupid (...)
8. T: A stupid thing?

9. L1: The point the Americans is a terrible (...) for the world is a terrible (...) But (...) the population in Iraq is good because she change the government (...) modelo de governo, teacher?
10. T: The model, the pattern, the system
11. L1: Yes, change the model of government they have in Iraq
12. T: So you think for the Americans it is a catastrophe and for Iraq is good?
13. L1: No (...) is bad for two, but for the point of view American people (...) no, no, for Iraq people is a new model of government

The way Teacher 2 provides opportunities for speaking is similar to the way Teacher 1 does. Nevertheless, Teacher 2 does not provide as much feedback, be it implicitly or explicitly, on learners' linguistic problems as Teacher 1. As can be seen in lines 5, 9 and 13, L1 presents many language problems when trying to communicate. The teacher lets the learner free to try to convey meaning. Negative evidence is provided by the teacher only on line 6 (Depends *on* which point of view?). However, it does not seem to be noticed by L1 since the learner keeps the same problem in the attempt to communicate again in line 9 (*The point the Americans*). At the end of line 9, the learner seems to realize the lack of knowledge as he tries to communicate and asks the teacher for help concerning vocabulary. In this way, output led the learner to realize what he did not know about the target language, which is an indication that the noticing gap function is at play (Swain, 1985, 1995). As the discussion goes on, the teacher keeps asking students' opinions about the topic:

EXCERPT 3:

14. T: Oh, you agree that it is a chance for changing?
15. L1: It is
16. T: OK, do you agree with him?
17. LL: No

18. T: No? What do you think, then?
19. L2: I think the Iraq people don't want to see your (...) your relatives dying in (...) in the war (...) It's terrible to them
20. T: So you think it's a catastrophe?
21. L2: Yes, for the Iraq and the (...) rest of the world
22. L3: The television show to us that (...) the Iraq like the dominion of the United States
23. T: They like it?
24. L3: [The TV]

As can be seen in line 19, L2 makes mistakes by using the possessive adjective '*your*' instead of '*their*'. Again, in line 21, the learner places the definite article before Iraq. In addition to this, the learner also presents problems concerning the third person of the singular in line 22, and also seems to assume that the word information is a count noun. However, no feedback at all is provided by the teacher. This seems to indicate that, when the goal is speaking, Teacher 2's main concern is meaning.

As far as Teacher 3's opportunities for speaking are concerned, most of what takes place in the classroom also happens through speaking: checking exercise answers aloud, checking comprehension, discussing topics. In the next excerpt, Teacher 3 is making questions about a listening exercise.

EXCERPT 1:

21. T: What are some of the reasons her restaurant is successful?
22. L: Best quality and price
23. T: Yes, people go there to meet each other, to talk
24. L2: And she talks about también (...) other places (...) Puerto Rico
25. T: yes, what did she talk about these other places?
26. L3: She talks about the theme of the restaurant people like, Latin American

In excerpt 1, speaking is again being used as a vehicle to achieve another goal in the classroom; in this case, listening comprehension is being checked. Furthermore, opportunities to discuss topics present in the book units are also provided. This can be illustrated in the following excerpt:

EXCERPT 2:

1. T: When are we more ambitious?
2. LL: In the thirties
3. T: In our thirties, why?
4. L1: Because (...) we (...) we have more preocupações (...) and acquire more things
5. T: We have more worries in order to acquire more things
6. L1: We want more
7. T: Oh, we have different objectives? Is that what you mean?
8. L1: Yes
9. T: Do you agree?
10. L2: XXX
11. T: Yes, but we are already ambitious, isn't it?

Similarly to the previous teachers investigated in this study, Teacher 3's students also seem to notice gaps in their knowledge when they try to meet communicative goals, suggesting that the noticing gap function of output is at play (Swain, 1985, 1995). In line 4, L1 seems to realize lack of knowledge concerning vocabulary and the learner does try to solve this problem by saying the word he does not know in the second language, in his first language. Then, the teacher provides the vocabulary the learner does not know. Finally, the learner restates the sentence incorporating the word provided by the teacher.

Other instances of learners realizing gaps in language knowledge concerning vocabulary can be seen in the following excerpt. Teacher 3 is discussing another topic with her students:

EXCERPT 3:

101. T: Would you like to have your own business? L1, wake up!
(Laughing)
102. L1: My family has own business
103. T: What is it?
104. L1: It's a hotel
105. T: Oh, a hotel! Is it here in Florianópolis?
106. L1: Yes XXX hotel
107. T: Would you like to be in the same area?
108. L1: I work in hotel for five years
109. T: Ok, what do you do there?
110. L1: In the future I think my father will aposentar and [I will]
111. T: [Retire] Ok, so you intend to manage the hotel. Some people don't want to be involved in the family business because they like something else, is this your case?
112. L1: No, I like (...) The hotel como posso dizer não consume todo seu tempo (...)
113. T: Oh, you don't have to spend all your time in a hotel
114. L1: So, you can work in a hotel and another place
115. T: Any other business?
116. L2: No
117. T: Why not?
118. L2: I don't like (...) when you have a business you are (...) the boss and many preoccupations
119. T: This is a very interesting point. Let's say when you are the boss [you have]
120. L2: [I prefer] (...) to be (...) empregado
121. T: To be an employee

As can be seen, in lines 110, 112, and 120, learners try to solve their problems concerning vocabulary either by asking the teacher for help or simply by saying the words they do not know in their first language. In both cases, the teacher provides the word learners are in search for.

In short, all teachers investigated reveal similar approaches concerning the opportunities provided for speaking in the classroom. Most of the speaking activities carried out by the teachers are Topic-based activities (Ur, 1996). Such activities “simply ask students to talk about a subject and the discussion is clearly the main objective” (Ur, 1996:122). Despite the similarities concerning the way speaking is dealt with by these teachers, two features seem to be peculiar. First, feedback, be it implicit or explicit, seems to be more emphasized by Teacher 1. Second, Teacher 1 seems to be the only one who does not view speaking only as communication in the sense that she emphasizes both meaning and form.

The interview sessions revealed that this tendency towards speaking, having it either as a means to accomplish other goals, or as a goal achieved through discussions, seems to be a pattern in the way teachers work the speaking skill with their students.

Concerning the types of opportunities provided for speaking in the classroom, Teacher 1 states that:

In the classroom, I think learners should use language to communicate. In order to do that, they should be involved by the topic or the theme of the lesson. In order to be involved they should be motivated by the theme. Thus, the theme must be relevant for them. Second, the theme has to be as real as possible, I mean, the theme should belong to the learners' real life, age, social level and interest. The teacher should speak English as much as possible in the classroom because the teacher is a source of input, and if I speak English this will help them speak, too. When students make mistakes which impair the message, I interfere. But, if the message is conveyed I take notes on learners' mistakes and write them on the board later on.

From the answers Teacher 1 gives, three features seem to emerge as relevant. First the way she views the topic or theme of the lesson as a valuable construct within the speaking skill. Second, she emphasizes how important she considers the speaking of the target language most of the time by herself and her students. Third, she emphasizes the value of teachers' feedback on learners' speech.

Similarly, Teacher 2 states:

I make questions, I put them in pairs so that they can talk and discuss questions, sometimes questions proposed by the book, sometimes the ones that I bring, during listening exercises, I make questions so that they can give me the answers that they have understood from the listening. Also, the reading exercises I correct orally so I, they speak. Socializing, every beginning of class we socialize a lot.

Similarly, Teacher 2 emphasizes discussions around questions proposed by the book or suggested by herself. In addition, she reveals opportunities for speaking as a vehicle to achieve other goals in the classroom such as exercise correction and socializing.

Teacher 3 also states that:

First of all, I give opportunities by bringing to classes issues that interest them, topics that are related to their lives, to their reality, and sometimes asking them to bring these issues to class.

Again, the main concern towards the speaking skill seems to be the relevance the topics chosen have for learners. In short, all teachers value the topic for discussion as a relevant variable within speaking in the classroom. These types of opportunities provided for speaking seem to be influenced by teachers' goals concerning the speaking skill. Teacher 1 pursues the following goals:

Besides meaning, I worry about accuracy and fluency, too.

By pursuing such goals, Teacher 1 seems to explain why she values topics, feedback, and the speaking of the target language as much as possible. Since she values not only fluency but also accuracy, this

seems to justify why, besides providing opportunities for discussions, she also provides moments to give learners feedback on form.

Teacher 2 states the following about her goals:

Well, if they are here, if they are taking the course that means that they want to communicate in English, they want to be able to read in English. But I know, from the papers that I've read, academic readings, that most students have difficulties in speaking. So, I encourage them to speak as often as they can so that they get used to this action, you know, so that they can articulate more often the sounds because some of the sounds are not sounds that we have in our language, so they get used to the sounds. So, this way they get used to it by doing it, by practicing. I try to make them comfortable in a nice atmosphere, I bring interesting topics.

Teacher 2 aims at having learners practice the language orally as much as they can. She believes any kind of oral production, even reading exercise answers aloud, helps speaking. Thus, such goals seem to be in accordance with the variety of opportunities provided by her.

Teacher 3 states that her goals are:

First of all, I have to follow the topic of units of the book. I'm not so free to create. So, I have to see what the objectives are in a specific unit of the book and, then, I try to adapt that to these topics that maybe will make the students feel more enthusiastic to speak. I think of communication, always keeping that in mind. They have to communicate.

Again, the importance attributed to topics and communication in the classroom is revealed. In addition to this, Teacher 3 mentions constraint related to course books and objectives of the course.

In sum, Teacher 1 pursues meaning *and* form during communication in the classroom. On the other hand, Teachers 2 and 3 seem to pursue meaning *over* form. These goals seem to be grounded within teachers' perspective towards the speaking skill. Teacher 1 states her perspectives as following:

Speaking for me, be it in L1 or L2, is an ability which is acquired step-by-step throughout the individual's life. Learning how to speak takes time and effort because cognitive and physical processes are involved. Speaking is producing oral language to communicate ideas, feelings, information, or speaking may be just interacting socially without any predetermined communicative intention.

Such perspective towards the speaking skill may suggest why Teacher 1 is concerned not only about discussing topics, but also about emphasizing accuracy. She views speaking as a skill which takes time and effort to be acquired, hence, focusing solely on conveying meaning may not be enough to develop such a complex skill.

Teacher 2 seems to view speaking as follows:

(...) Speaking, Let me see, in the classroom, as a teacher, I consider speaking as any kind of oral production. Sometimes when students write down an answer for a question and read it aloud, I consider it speaking, any kind of oral production they have in the classroom, discussions, every time they ask me questions concerning homework, concerning any kind of assignment I give them, this is speaking."

Since speaking is viewed as any kind of oral production, even if it is reading aloud, this may be the reason why Teacher 2 believes speaking will be acquired mostly through practicing, getting used to speaking by doing it.

Teacher 3 states the following about her perspectives:

I believe it's the ability the student will acquire to use the language, not only in terms of accuracy... Speaking is the ability to use the language as natural as possible to communicate even if they make mistakes.

This perspective Teacher 3 has towards speaking suggests that she places meaning *over* form, since accuracy is mentioned, but the ability to communicate is the key point.

As can be seen throughout teachers' reports, the way teachers promote opportunities for speaking seems to be influenced by teachers' goals towards the speaking skill, and these goals, in turn, seem to be embedded in what they believe speaking is. In the next section, I draw some considerations as regards the findings of the present study.

5. Conclusion

The present study is small and no strong claims can be made based on such a small data set, number of classes investigated, and number of class transcripts selected for discussion. The findings of the present study are to be seen as modest and suggestive rather than conclusive. Despite the limitations of the study, some considerations can be put forward concerning the way speaking is dealt with by these teachers.

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' procedures concerning the speaking skill in terms of (1) teachers' perspectives towards speaking, (2) types of opportunities provided for speaking the L2, and (3) functions of output mostly emphasized within the opportunities provided for speaking. Results revealed that teachers present similar pedagogical approaches for the speaking skill.

Concerning teachers' perspectives towards speaking, Teacher 1 views speaking as a demanding skill, and she emphasizes meaning *and* form when dealing with the speaking skill. Teachers 2 and 3, on the other hand, view speaking as communication and tend to emphasize meaning *over* form.

Results also showed that teachers promote several types of opportunities for speaking in the classroom: socializing, asking students questions, correcting exercises, checking listening and reading comprehension. Moreover, results revealed that Teacher 1 provides opportunities for corrective feedback. During feedback, some instances of focus on form emerged when dealing with the speaking skill. Apart from these instances of corrective feedback, most of the time devoted to speaking seems to focus on meaning. It seems that teachers tend to focus on fluency at the expense of accuracy and complexity.

As for the functions of output mostly emphasized by these teachers, I am inclined to believe that teachers seem to emphasize the practice function of output, which is related to fluency. They do not seem to design activities for the purposes of leading learners to notice gaps, test implicit hypothesis, and carry out metalinguistic reflection, which are the functions of output related to accuracy (Swain, 1985, 1995).

Although teachers do not seem to design activities in order to address these functions of output related to accuracy, such functions seem to emerge from the part of the learners as they try to meet their communicative goals. Learners seem to notice gaps in their knowledge mainly concerning lack of vocabulary. In order to solve these problems as they try to communicate, learners use mainly two problem-solving mechanisms: literal translation and directed appeal for help (Dörnyei & Kormos, 1998). Teachers, in turn, just provide the vocabulary or grammatical forms learners need to carry on their discussions. Thus, I may argue that the functions of output related to accuracy tend to be treated in a random way as they emerge from the part of students.

All in all, it seems that speaking is treated randomly by these teachers. In most of the classes observed, speaking seems to be the vehicle of communication in the classroom. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986:140), the language “should not only be seen as an object of study but also as a vehicle of communication in the classroom”. However, it seems that teachers are treating speaking in an opposite trend. In other words, teachers seem to treat speaking as if it were *only* the vehicle of communication but not *also* a goal or skill in its own right, which requires specific treatment (Bygate, 2001b; D’Ely & Mota, 2004).

Whenever speaking seems to be the goal, it is usually treated through topic-based activities (Ur, 1996). These activities simply require that learners talk freely about familiar topics without any specific outcome to be pursued. As claimed by Bygate (2001b), the choice of familiar topics is relevant so that attention can focus on the selection, assembly, and articulation of language. When topics are familiar learners seem to feel more comfortable to talk in class. This is also relevant since learning is likely to take place in an atmosphere in which anxiety and inhibition are low (Williams & Burden, 1997).

However, I believe that discussing familiar topics and keeping anxiety low are not the only variables involved in dealing with such a complex skill as speaking. L1 speech production is highly automatic and speakers, in most standardized communicative situations, have ready-made plans available to them that contribute to reduce the processing load (Levelt, 1989).

Such a high degree of automatization as in L1 does not apply to the L2 to the same extent. For this reason, in many situations L2 learners may need to creatively construct plans for communicative situations since ready-made chunks may not be available, and this activation of procedures (lexical retrieval and morphological marking) demands high degrees of cognitive control (Mehnert, 1998). Moreover, speaking as output may play a role in acquisition (Swain, 1985, 1995). These complexities of the speaking skill should be taken into account in the attempt to treat speaking in a more systematic fashion.

Bygate (2001b) claims that the paramount feature of speaking is spontaneity. In order to help learners' achieve automaticity and, consequently, spontaneous L2 speech production, the speaking skill should be worked in a controlled fashion in the classroom (Bygate, 2001b). In other words, speaking as a skill in its own right also needs to be worked pedagogically, in a planned and systematic way in the classroom (Bygate, 2001b; D'Ely & Mota, 2004). The key question seems to be: *How* can speaking be treated in a more systematic fashion in the L2 classroom?

Although pre-task planning and task repetition have been operationalized mainly in experimental studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Gass et al, 1999; Bygate, 2001a; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; D'Ely, 2006; just to mention a few), I believe they can also be pedagogical tools which could be certainly implemented in the classroom in the attempt to treat speaking and the functions of output in a more systematic fashion.

If learners are allowed time for planning prior to the oral discussions, this planning time could lead them to notice interlanguage gaps beforehand. Perhaps it would give them the chance to work on the necessary language items and have teachers' help before actually

carrying out the discussion. In this way, learners' noticing of gaps would be treated in a more systematic way and could lead to more gains in learning (Swain, 1985, 1995). Moreover, time for planning beforehand could give learners the chance to discuss and reflect upon the target language, thereby emphasizing the metalinguistic function of output (Swain, 1985, 1995) in a more controlled way.

Likewise, task repetition could also be a way to give learners a second chance to work on vocabulary and grammatical gaps they might have as well as lead them to reflect upon the target language within the task being carried out a second time. Task repetition would also be a way to emphasize the practice function of output, which is related to fluency.

Obviously, chances for speaking completely spontaneously should also be provided along with opportunities for pre-task planning and repetition. My suggestion is that opportunities for planning, repetition, and improvisation seem to encompass the functions of output (the fluency and accuracy functions) in a more balanced way and, thus, may provide a more systematic treatment towards the speaking skill.

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