

Get Real: Using Real Dialogue in the English Language Classroom

Rebecca Brinkley, Nagoya University of Foreign Studies, Japan

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Abstract

By using authentic communicative events such as telephone conversations, office gossip and shopkeeper-customer dialogues as example conversations, a student's communicative ability will improve and thus prepare them for real life situations. By being able to navigate their way around a lot of the unnecessary utterances such as 'yeh', 'ok' and 'ah' which occur in these dialogues, English learners will be able to participate and understand these communicative events far better than if they were removed. By analysing real communicative events language teachers are able to be fully aware of all the intricacies that encompass a language. In order to unlock this 'real' English and to convey it onwards to language learners in the classroom, short conversation should be recorded and analysed, with the results passed on in the classroom. By doing this, a communicative event will demonstrate that language is not neat and tidy, and in fact, includes a lot of unnecessary words to get from A to B. By exposing language learners to this unnecessary language and not just the A and B, the language teacher is providing the learner with authentic language to model.

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Introduction

Teaching oral communication to learners of English is a difficult task. The type of situations to be prepared for, what language variations to use, and awareness of cultural differences are all areas that need to be considered when planning a syllabus. Many oral communication textbooks claim to be modeled on native speakers' daily conversation, yet, listening to many of the tracks included with the text, they somewhat appear rehearsed and quite dull. They most often are recorded by speakers using a standard English, in a very clear voice. This formal standard English may prepare a student for a formal speech, or job interview, but it will not see them participate to their best ability in daily conversations with native English speakers.

Being able to use authentic communicative events such as telephone conversations, office gossip and shopkeeper-customer dialogues as example conversations will greatly improve an English learner for real life situations. By being able to navigate their way around a lot of the unnecessary utterances such as 'yeh', 'ok' and 'ah', English learners will be able to participate and understand these communicative events.

Method and Findings

By analysing communicative events language teachers are able to be fully aware of all the intricacies that encompass a language. In order to unlock this 'real English' and to convey it onwards to language learners in the classroom, a short conversation was recorded between two native English speaking coworkers in their office. The CE (communicative event) featured two participants, with one also being the observer. Being an observer and participant comes with some complexities. One such is observer paradox.

In order to overcome observer paradox, sociolinguist Labov (1972, p.209) suggests to be faced with life threatening situations or to retell personal experiences in order to lose yourself in the event, and forget your role, thus allowing natural speech to occur. In the case of this CE, a recent humorous event shared between the two participants was introduced which enabled the observer to forget that the event was being recorded and produce a natural language. After the CE was recorded it was transcribed (Atkinson & Heritage, 1984) then analysed to reveal language of an office conversation. Dell-Hymes' SPEAKING model (Eggins & Slade, 2005, p.33), along with Saville-Troike's 11 components (1989, pg.138) were employed to analyse the CE and provide conclusions regarding communicative approaches for teaching purposes. The analyse can be broken down into the 11 components, which also embody the model proposed by Dell-Hymes, of ; genre, topic, function, setting, key, participants, message form, message content, act sequence, rules of interaction, and norms of interpretation

The genre of the communicative event can be categorised as 'office talk'. Here, 'Office Talk' does not refer to talk which occurs during meetings or between subordinates and superiors but usual small talk between coworkers about the 'ins and outs' of their shared place of employment. The 'office talk' could perhaps even fit into the classification of gossip. According to Holmes (1995, p.330) gossip is considered the relaxed in-group talk that happens in a casual setting that helps promote solidarity. In the CE it helped the coworkers unwind and form a common

bond. Gossip is known to be predominantly a female linguistic feature and in the two times it occurred was introduced by the female participant. However, the male participant did join in as displayed in line 7.

7 A: Ah, let's just hope he shows up (hhh)

This comment could be classed as a criticism of someone's behavior, an example of a common female gossip trait (Holmes, 1992, p. 331), and could be considered a male partaking in gossip reminiscent of a female. Holmes suggests that women tend to gossip more about personal experiences and relationships, while men tend to keep their topics fact based. (Holmes, 1992, p.332) The topic forming the gossip is A's superior and his tendency to be late, or failure to attend meetings. In the case of the superior, is not entirely true. Thus, both participants were able to gossip and as a result, the genre of the CE can be considered a relaxed office conversation, where both participants were comfortable and able to join in easily.

The topic discussed in the CE is about work. B asks A where a meeting is to be held, and later on in the CE, also asks B about any new employees. This topic is a common one, and from experience, is not modeled enough in the ESL classroom. Business English or English language required for the business domain is an area of language teaching that often gets much attention. Today, English being a world language, is required for anyone wishing to gain employment in international business. However, much of the language that takes place in day-to-day working environments is between coworkers. Unlike other languages which require a special form, or honorific language for using with younger or elder coworkers, English workers sharing an office tend to speak in a similar fashion, despite differences in age. In the CE both participants use a casual form of yes, 'yeh' and 'yep' approximately 13 times. This demonstrates the real casualness of the topic and the uselessness of formal business language in the office at times.

To know why the participants were engaged in the conversation is important to understand why coworkers communicate at work. The function of the CE is for one colleague to gain information about a meeting that both participants are to join and any new employees who have joined their place of employment. The CE also allows for gossip to occur and as mentioned previously acts as a means to relax and bond. Line 24 demonstrates this.

24.A: Who else is, who else is, working here? Is it just

Here A wants to gain information about new employees but instead of directly asking about them, does so indirectly. A does not finish the sentence as she assumes that B has picked up on her need to know about any new employees. A continues to fish for information, and makes a criticism by suggesting the new employees are never working.

26. B: Cause (pause) it's just, no one's there (pause) that often

The function has gone from one of gaining information to one of stating criticisms. This is an example of female gossip and its tendency to be in the form of criticisms (Holmes, 1992, p. 335).

The setting for this CE is a university lecturer's office, which is shared by other non-tenured lecturers. The CE takes place with the two participants sitting at A's desk, both facing the computer. There is minimal eye contact as both are looking ahead. A is looking at their computer and B is looking at the items, such as photos and figurines on A's desk. Since the setting is not entirely private, the desks are separated by partitions; the CE could be heard by others in the office, which could affect the how the participants communicated. This semi-public setting sees the participants refrain from using swear words and blatantly gossiping about other employees. The key of the CE is casual and jocular. Although the participants are colleagues of different age and sex, this does not appear to influence the language used. Although there is a ten-year age gap between A and B, both participants kept a casual and light key throughout the event. Both participants are Australian citizens who have been living in Japan and this fact could be a key to the casualness of the language used.

This takes us to the participants. As mentioned above, the participants are colleagues who teach English at university. A is a forty year old married female, and B is a thirty year old single male. A ranks slightly higher than B in terms of employment position. Both are Australian which does influence the language form used. The language used or the message form is a standard spoken Australian English. The lack of long pauses expresses the comfortableness of both participants during the event. If A and B were of different nationalities there would be less use of 'yeh' and 'yep' and the final sentence of 'no worries', a quintessential Australian term for 'do not worry' or the standard English, 'no problem' would be missing. By seeing this form of English displayed it is natural to understand why there is an importance to teach English learners forms other than a standard American.

As described by Saville-Troike (1989, p. 150) message form and content are difficult to separate, however, in this CE's analysis, the content is the semantics behind the topic delivery; Question, answer, comment, comment, question and so on. This is closely related to act sequence, which will be described in the following. Act sequence is the area, which governs the form and order of the event. This area is important in order to understand why people communicate the way they do, and how certain conversations are able to flow and other not. The act sequence which occurs in the CE between A and B began with a work related question which is answered, then a question about a non-work related humorous topic, which is also answered. Lastly a work related question is asked, which is answered before the CE ends. This sequence sees work or serious talk, balanced out with a lighter topic. If the lighter topic was not introduced, the CE would have taken a more serious turn, and would be reminiscent of an environment shared between new workers or workers still on polite terms with each other. Thus it could be said that the sequence required for a light and casual office environment is the following.

Work Topic-non-related work topic-work topic

Labov suggests that that there is also an order governing the social construct of shared knowledge, which is evident in the CE (Corder, 1992, p.122).

How one speaks and how to 'read the mood' can be seen by analyzing the CE to reveal the rules of interaction. This starts with the setting. Different environments

require different language. Conversations in a non-private setting should usually be void of vulgar language and talk regarding other people negatively. This is clearly evident when A makes a comment regarding a superior's lack of punctuality regarding meetings, he lowers his voice to not be heard by others in the office.

7. A: Let's just hope °he shows up° (hhh)

If A and B were discussing the matter in a private setting, A would not hesitate to comment on his superior without whispering and perhaps use more colorful language. These rules may appear in most languages, and most probably do not need to be emphasised in the English learners classroom. What may need to be emphasised in the classroom is the use of leave taking, or the conversation ending cues. Pre-closing (Richards & Schmidt, 1983, p.134) are considered the speak acts which occur prior to closure of a CE. The CE's pre-closing language can be evident twice, first at line 20, and last at line 33. In the first pre-closing, it functions as language redundancy, that is, unnecessary words, that communicate to the listener that the topic should end (Richards & Schmidt, 1983, p.123).

18. B: Yeh

19. A: Yeh

20. B: Yeh, Anyway

21. A: You ready for the week ahead?

B's use of 'anyway' in line 20, signals that there is nothing more to add to the topic and that she would like to change the topic. The rule for A to follow here is to indeed change the topic, which he does in line 21.

The second pre-closing occurs in line 33, with some redundant language occurring, to lead up to a leave taking of, 'Sorry, I gotta go'.

This area of communication is a necessity for the language learner, particularly, in the area of oral communication. According to Richards & Schmidt (1983, p.135) non-natives may not understand the purpose of these pre-closing utterances and find themselves lost.

(34) B: Oh, ok. ((pause))Oh, Sorry I gotta go.

(35) A: °ok°

Above B is using the pre-closing of 'oh, ok' to soften the idea of her leaving.

Gardner (p.105) suggests the use of 'uh huh' and 'mm hm' act as continuers or topic changers. In the CE this is apparent with the use of 'yeh' and 'ok'.

Being able to change topics mid conversation is a skill much needed in the language classroom. Struggling with ideas, and long drawn out pauses can shut down any English learner, and lower confidence. The use of 'anyway' is used twice in the CE to keep the conversation running.

In line 7, B senses A's reluctance to continue a conversation about their superior regarding his habit for coming to meetings late.

7. A: Ah, °let's just hope ° he shows up (hhh)

This feeling of hesitance is apparent in A's use of a quieter voice and the audible aspiration at the end of the sentence. It was at this point that B decided to change the topic.

8. B: Yeh, anyway, did you get, that um, picture that Takeshi sent you yesterday?

The changing of the topic solved two problems with the event recording and analysis. Firstly it lightened the mood and helped rid B of any observer paradox, and secondly it aided in ensuring the conversation could continue as it involved a previous event both parties had in common and could equally comment on. Also of importance in regards to rules governing speech acts, is adjoining pairs, which is evident in the CE. Generally, when someone apologises, one usually responds with a comment suggesting there was nothing to apologise for. B apologises for leaving and ending the conversation, and A responds with 'no worries'. These rules are important for the participants to be able to have conversation closure and feel comfortable in doing so. If A had not responded with 'no worries', B would perhaps feel guilty for abruptly ending the conversation.

Lastly the norms of interpretation will be considered. The norms embody what a speech community considers appropriate or 'normal' in a CE (Saville-Troike, 1989, p.156). By looking at other components such as setting, genre and topic, the norms can be understood clearly (Saville-Troike, 1989, p.156). The Setting of the CE dictates how and what type of language is considered the 'norm'. This semi-public setting featured in the CE sees the participants refrain from using swear words and blatantly gossiping about other employees. Knowing when to whisper and when not to, is also featured in the CE, and demonstrates the importance of setting on language use.

The genre in the CE dictates that a casual language is to be used. It is fairly unlikely to gossip using a formal or polite form of a language, unless, gossiping to one's superior, which is highly unlikely. The gossip which took place in the CE does appear critical of A's superior, which opens up the idea of complaining or 'whinging' and how it is considered typical Australian work behavior. Since the participants are Australian it is considered 'normal' to complain or gossip about one's superior. The act of disrespecting authority began in early colonial Australia with the miners and their attempt at civil war in the Eureka Stockade. Ever since, it has been considered a key feature in Australian identity and also expresses the idea of 'mateship' (A Dictionary of Australian colloquialisms, 1996, p. 126).

Conclusion

By analysing a simple short conversation by two university lecturers, it is easy to see how language teaching can sometimes be over complicated. Much of the communication which took place was not concerned with correct grammar, or specialized vocabulary, but with social and cultural awareness. For the language learner, knowing when it is appropriate to change a topic, finish a conversation, or lower one's voice is imperative to comfortably join in and competently partake in a communicative event.

This CE demonstrated that language is not neat and tidy, and in fact, includes a lot of unnecessary words to get from A to B. By exposing language learners to this

unnecessary language and not just the A to B, the language teacher is providing the learner with 'real' language to model. What can be taken away from this research into dialogue is that language teachers must be reminded of their role as example speakers in the classroom. Instead of looking for published materials of model dialogues, teachers should utilize their own language and experience. By incorporating authentic dialogues into lessons, the teacher is providing the student with a genuine language experience that can be used outside the classroom. Though the 'uh', 'yeh' and 'ok', may not have been what Prof Henry Higgins intended for Eliza Doolittle from the famous Pygmalion, however for the non-native speaker, it is perhaps needed in order to take part in such communicative events as the one which took place in this study.

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