

Learning matters

This Learning Matters is dedicated with warm affection and deep respect to the memory of Paul Sofer, Senior Lecturer, Instytut Anglistyki, University of Łódź, Poland, who died on February 14 2009 and with whom I became friends almost 40 years ago and to whom, I realise too late, I did not listen enough.

The quantity requested was two

Russell Whitehead

Last issue, I promised (well, threatened really) to continue considering listening ability and autonomous learning/self-assessment in relation to three areas: the interactive, the locative, and the emotive, and this issue I'm looking at the first of those. In the last issue, I was trying to make the point that listening is a crucial area for independent learning. On the one hand, it is folly to see listening as independent *of* other aspects of language learning. On the other hand, the stuff that's going on in and around listening is definitely complicated, and it's quite a tall order for a lone autonomous learner to set out to get really good at listening. Whether you teach classes or deal with learners in self-access environments or some form of on-line context, you need to pass on your understanding of the complexity in ways that are helpful to them. If you design courses, produce materials or deliver assessment, then you need to reflect the reality of listening in what you give to or ask of learners.

Last issue I was also looking at the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which, despite its name, is being used across languages of all sorts and around the world. This issue I will continue to look at some examples of the Can-do Statements of which it consists. The notion of basing ability, ambition and self-assessment on such statements is

presumably an appealing one to readers of this newsletter.

This is the who of listening. I struggle to think of listening materials that are designed directly to help learners with conversation in any kind of natural way. Remember Dean from the last issue: 'I speak a little Spanish, but I can't understand a word.' We talk about knowing how to *speak* languages, and most listening comes hand-in-hand with speaking. In interactive situations, there are very complex demands put upon the various speakers.

What does the CEFR indicate we should be aiming at here? There's a whole section of Can-do Statements under the heading 'Understanding Conversation Between Native Speakers'. For the lower end of level B1, there's 'Can generally follow the main points of extended discussion around him/her, provided speech is clearly articulated in standard dialect.' If you felt you wanted to aim a little higher than that, at the upper end of B1, there's: 'Can enter unprepared into conversations on familiar topics.' Or, if you want to stick to a more modest ambition, there's A2 with: 'Can handle very short exchanges but is rarely able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord, though he/she can be made to understand if the speaker will take the trouble.'

Well, I banged on about dialect a bit last time, so let's leave that for now. But what are 'familiar topics'? How much 'trouble'

may a native speaker be reasonably expected to 'take'? What about the problems of causing offence?

One of the first issues for speaking and listening interactively in other languages is the lurking fear that all may not be what it seems. How can we know—how can an autonomous learner be expected to know—what intercultural and socio-cultural factors are likely to be in play? Will compliments be complimentary, or the cause of diplomatic incidents? What topics are no-nos? How do gender differences, seniority, friendliness, and so on, work in this other language? These days, it's probably more about the intercultural or acultural or cross-cultural no-man's lands, hinterlands and wastelands that 'boundless and bare' 'stretch far away'. English is used by people who are foreign to each other in all sorts of work and social situations every day all over the world. Who's to say what the cultural norms should be? Shall we agree to behave in a basically 'Japanese' way while speaking in English in an airport lounge in Oman, since I am Dutch and hoping to get a nice big contract with your Japanese company?

Rather like bringing up triplets (I'm told), as soon as you start paying attention to one factor, another one starts to wriggle out of control. The smallest of grammatical slips can undo hours of careful social bonding. In Italian, you don't 'like' things, things 'please' you (as of course it used to be in English, and still is when you go to see Shakespeare, etc), and so, as a native English speaker, you have to bolt together nouns or pronouns with verb conjugations in what feels like an upside down way. I can still recall the husband's face as I leaned forward at a dinner in Italy, meaning to express the fact that I liked the food but telling the wife that she pleased me extremely. Such small knots sit uncomfortably with assertions that fluency should be the main aim, that grammar is only the servant of meaning and so on. But how can the autonomous learner know

what to prioritise, what may be his or her undoing?

What does something like 'Let's meet for a drink' *mean*? How should you respond? A serious problem in listening is not the difficulty of understanding the actual words used, but of understanding what the real message is.

That's not to say that understanding the basic words used isn't overwhelmingly difficult sometimes. Much of the conversational English out there isn't structured in the kinds of syntactic and linear sentences that learners tend to study, so they're often simply unprepared for real spoken English. It seems to them to be all broken up, messy. This is because little effort has been put into assisting them to see the patterns of spoken interactive language.

Conversation is complicated and has lots of funny little rules and patterns. Uses of verb tenses may well not fit with the grammatical explanations the learner has been provided with. The imperative is just one example. 'There are several special cases where the imperative is polite when used asymmetrically. One is where what is being commanded is something the listener would rather like to do but is loth to initiate [...] when the host is offering something or giving permission – "Come in", "Have a piece of cake", etc.' (*Spoken English: A Practical Guide*, Cheepen and Monaghan, 1990: 72). In a kind of reverse of this, I remember amusing a Buenos Aires shopkeeper by asking for something (apples, I think) in a direct translation of, 'Could I have...' She replied, smiling, that yes, she supposed I *could* if did really want some... Meanwhile, England is full of shopkeepers whose backs are slightly up because Spanish speakers wander in and say, 'Give me some apples.'

The reason all this is so tricky is that the very point of conversation is relationship-building, so anything that upsets the relationship is making the whole operation seem pointless. 'The aim of speakers in conversation is to construct,

maintain and develop the relationship between them in the context of a shared world picture [...] Human beings pursue this goal in a general way by verbalising and attempting to match their subjective versions of reality. In linguistic terms, this is largely a matter of negotiating what topics are suitable for discussion, cooperation in telling stories arising from those topics, and arriving at matching (or at least not markedly diverging) evaluations of the components of those stories, and of details of the environment of each encounter [...] Much of the search for topics of conversation is to find something to agree about.' (*ibid*) So the basis of speaking is often the telling of stories one way and another. This means that listening consists in large part of picturing and reacting to these stories. 'The story is, in fact, the most familiar structure we encounter in language, and we rely on its format for our understanding and interpretation of what happens in the world [...] many instances of the story occur within conversation. They may appear as jokes, pieces of gossip, accounts of what the conversational participants or people known to them have been doing, or even (particularly among school children) quite lengthy reports of the story line of a television programme, film or book.' (Cheepen and Monaghan, 1990: 52)

CEFR has a section on Compensating, which specifies in useful detail what you need to be able to do to try to keep your speaking going. As its highest level, C2, there's: 'Can substitute an equivalent term for a word he/she can't recall so smoothly that it is scarcely noticeable.' That's an interesting one, because, along with most people I know, I spend lots of time dragging perfectly good and fluent conversations to a halt while I search for some word, phrase, date or number.

At a good intermediate level, B2, there's: 'Can use circumlocution and paraphrase to cover gaps in vocabulary and structure.' There's a whiff of the CIA Covert Operations or our jolly good chaps

on the run from Colditz in this. Fluency as deceit. Getting away with it. But the real problem for the lone autonomous learner wanting to improve in listening for conversation is two-fold. Firstly, what can you use when you don't understand the key word or phrase the other speaker just used? Secondly, how can you know whether the circumlocution you're using is a red herring—that the real problem is not you lack *le mot juste* but that you're banging on about a wholly unsuitable topic in the first place?

I'm not knocking CEFR; I'm reflecting on how really very demanding the actual requirements of good language use are.

Under the heading Planning, A2 has the apparently gentle 'Can recall and rehearse an appropriate set of phrases from his/her repertoire.' But where does this repertoire come from? Of what does it consist? Who's to say what's appropriate and what's not? It is unlikely that an inevitably rather small repertoire will manage to come up with something appropriate for all the situations and contexts in which many adults are going to find themselves. Under Compensating for the same level, there's: 'Can use an inadequate word from his/her repertoire and use gesture to clarify what he/she wants to say.' This is tough stuff: gestures are an absolute minefield cross-culturally. Sometimes the clarification is easy, sometimes it's not, and sometimes it's not possible. In the Cluny museum in Paris I once asked one of the assistants what the weather was like, meaning what time was it. He roared with laughter. In that situation, of course, I was able to point at where my non-existent watch would have been on my wrist and still get the information I required. Many's the furious barman in London pubs I've found it harder (though not impossible) to pacify as some foreign student I'd be in the company of would wave two fingers in the barman's face. The 'inadequate' word would be 'beer' or 'coffee' and the two fingers in V-formation with the back of the hand facing the listener would be,

supposedly, the ‘gesture’ to clarify that the quantity requested was two.

Russell Whitehead has been a teacher and self-access co-ordinator and now writes books, CD-ROMs and on-line materials and tests. His new website is now live at:

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