Speaking Grammatically ... Grammatically Speaking

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Introduction

Speaking grammatically and learning to speak English grammatically involve understanding the grammar system for spoken English. Grammatically speaking, the mode of oral communication presents differences from written forms. This paper will present an overview of aspects of spoken English related to classroom needs. Firstly, understanding how we construct grammatical speech requires an understanding of the sounds, patterns and forms. Secondly, as educators, we then need to be teaching spoken communication which is internationally comprehensible. Aspects of the wide field of spoken English will be discussed with reference to research and classroom needs. It is useful to begin with a description of the grammar of spoken English.

1. Understanding the grammar of speaking

The grammar of speech in English has received increasing attention from the recognition of a TESOL group in pronunciation to the integration of pronunciation tasks in general texts. The grammar of speech is a field of great complexity, yet if one is to work with classroom approaches it is useful to selectively describe key features paralleling the recent voluminous corpora research (Biber et al, 1999). In particular the development of grammatical speech can be based on recognition of some key factors that make speech grammatical, namely:

- The importance of articulation skills
- The role of the utterance as a basic unit of speech
- The role of stress and intonation
- The natural occurrences of redundancy and repetition
- The use of interaction and information routines.

1.1 Articulation skills

Articulation of sounds involves particular motor skills that have at times been neglected in the drive for communicative language learning. Perceiving, recalling and articulating have always played an important role in speaking grammatically (Mackey, 1965: Naiman, 1987). Pronunciation activities do provide learning experiences to develop accurate control over the sound system. If one assumes that the message and situation are enough to drive communication then the years of fluency-based tasks (Bygate, 1987) would have created greater speaking skills, yet marked difficulties of understanding do result from pronunciation difficulties. Flege and Port (1981:125) found that "the most important interference from 1L to 2L occurs at the level of phonetic implementation rather than at an abstract level of organization based on features." While the long term debate continues about the relative importance of articulation or segmental development as compared to suprasegmental or utterance level learning (Brown and Yule, 1983), it is clear that pronunciation of sounds links strongly to understanding. Let us look at a few of the Singaporean examples collected by the writer and Yeow Kok Liang:

a) Our speaker today is the din of the English language department. ('Dean' was intended, not 'din')
b) Hey your pants are leaking. ('Pens' was intended, not 'pants')
c) Rajoo went crazy over the nun. ('Naan' – an Indian bread' was intended, not 'nun')
d) The Director of the School of Engineering gave the project team a big grunt. ('Grant' was intended, not 'grunt')
e) Good morning class. I love you. ('All of you' was intended as a way to call attention, not 'I love you')

Pronunciation skills and attention to accuracy are an important aspect of clarity in the spoken message. Accuracy which Bygate defines as the 'motor-perceptive skills' in action (Bygate, 1987:5) can be seen as a parallel to awareness of form and word choice in written grammar. Accuracy can be defined as the acquiring of skills of oral production which are then applied in varied situations to

develop fluency (Murphy, 1991). Research into situations in the Singaporean context has recognized the role of accuracy as well as the rise of a distinctive local variety, which will be considered later in this paper (Brown, 1988; Pakir, 1995, Tay, 1993).

Accuracy in speech can be developed with specific tongue, mouth and awareness skills. Fortunately, we are able to describe these accuracy skills more effectively than in the days of audio-lingualism due to the use of fibre optic cameras and speech recognition software. From description of the motor- perception skills of speech there is a need to progress to teachable skills such as one finds in both regional and international approaches (Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin, 1996, Brown, 1992, Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 1998, Gilbert, 1993). Clearly one is not equating the need to recognize pronunciation teaching with one standard model or 'accent', yet it is useful to recognize that effective oral communication begins at the individual sound level. When one contextualises the specific sound development with the basic unit of speech, accuracy skills will acquire even greater meaning and relevance to learners.

1.2 The role of the utterance as the basic unit of speech

The call for the use of full grammatical units in oral English lessons is relevant, <u>only</u> when one realizes that a grammatical unit in speech is different from the written grammatical sentence. In speech, one works within the biological framework of being able to get a limited amount of sounds into the one breath unit. While it is true that punctuation reflects the speech based unit, the unit or 'utterance' does not often parallel the common written format of Subject -Verb. - Complement. In other words an utterance is not equivalent to a "full grammatical sentence" as often featured in examination prescriptions. Let us therefore, consider a definition of the basic spoken unit.

An utterance is a stream of speech with the following characteristics:

- It is bounded by pauses of variable length. Scollon (1974) in researching aphasia defined an utterance boundary as between one and eight seconds.
- An utterance or 'chunk of speech' is under one intonation contour. The intonation contour will center around stressed syllables. This contour often links to the speech function (Crookes, 1990; Brown et al, 1980).
- An utterance constitutes an idea or informational unit (Kroll, 1977) often signaling change in content (Shewan, 1988:124).

This definition is derived from research into varied discourse situations (Kroll, 1977; Crookes and Rulon, 1985; Crookes, 1990; Hall, 1994a). The unit of the utterance, as defined, is one that uses the physically identifiable characteristics of pause and intonation and the semantic units. The utterance is framed by pauses. It is a useful unit for understanding the grammar of speech and for teaching.

The utterance as a unit of speech has a parallel term in the extensive work of David Brazil (1994). Brazil describes tone units as 'building blocks out of which all spoken communication is constructed' (1994:3). Others term the utterance an 'intonation unit' (Celce-Murcia et al, 1996) or thought group (Smith et al, 1992), Many researchers agree with Brazil that individual sounds are important but may be most effectively mastered by advanced speakers if contextualised in the utterance or tone unit. It is worth noting that the articulation skills are not neglected in his advanced learner work, but are incorporated in the spoken unit revolving around awareness of tone. One could therefore argue that attention to discrete sound is not unwarranted for beginners, whose utterances will be shorter due to lack of vocabulary, while the tone unit is probably increasingly effective as one acquires more and more vocabulary. What is self evident is that people do not communicate merely through what can be termed the business of 'phonics.'

Brazil contextualises the role of working with utterances or tone units by stating:

If we want to focus upon the individual 'sounds' of a language, and to do so usefully, we must take account of what happens to them when the language is used to communicate. This really means being aware of how sounds are affected by the intonational shape of the stretch of speech they occur in and this in turn means focusing on the tone units that we find in any sample of used language (Brazil, 1994 :3-4).

The role of intonation is especially important when considering the language background of many learners in the ASEAN region in terms of stress-timed and syllable-timed languages and it is this area which the next section of the paper discusses.

1.3 The role of stress

At a word level of analysis, word meaning is often distinguished by the position of stress in the word. Stress also plays an important role in signaling meaning at an utterance level. It is useful to define stress in phonological terms, in order not to confuse it with a descriptor of the work conditions of many classroom teachers.

Stress may be defined as the weight that one puts on syllables so that some syllables are heavy and others are light (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 1998). Stress works at the word and utterance level. It is most obvious in the changes when, for example, one compares 'photograph, photographic, photographical and photographically.' Another commonly used area of stress comparison is between pairs such as **pro**spect –pro**spect, subject** –sub**ject** and others. However in a communicative approach to using the grammar of speech one cannot ignore the link between meaning and stress.

Speakers put more physical effort into weighting the important words (Pegolo, 1993). Stress is then working at the word level within the utterance. Within the utterance or tone unit, the primary stressed syllable may also be termed the 'tonic syllable' (Brazil, 1994). On a broader level, stress on important words plays an important role in presentation speaking (Hall, 1994). The effort by a speaker to 'punch out the meaning' as Toastmasters would describe the process can be measurable by spectograph and it is linked to clarity in a message.

Stress in a sentence is linked to the length of the stressed syllable in an important word. Usually these stressed words are lexical items which are "the main carriers of meaning in a text." (Biber, et al, 1999: 55). In other words, content and ideas are given extra volume and the grammatical function words of cohesion are less stressed. The stressed lexical item usually heads up an utterance according to corpora research and stressed words are often nouns of greater length than functional or grammar words such as prepositions. Often a stressed word is the subject of attention, in more ways than one. Chafe (1980) describes how within an intonation unit or utterance, words expressing old or known information are unstressed and spoken with lower pitch. Words expressing new information are stressed and spoken with a higher pitch. In unmarked utterances the stressed syllable in the last content word will be most obvious.

Stress functions in English as if the nature of what we hear first as the most important idea is echoed in the way the speaker organises his or her effort to speak. We put more phonological effort into the idea to gain listeners' attention so that the weight of the speech effort reflects the importance of the foregrounded information (Halliday, 1985).

The stress of certain words can only function with the role of unstressed parts of speech, as there is a physical limitation to the amount of effort that we can put into one breath unit. This differs from the underlying structure of some languages where every sound change carries meaning as in the variations of the often cited Mandarin syllable 'ma' Comparison has led to a continuum of language description where some languages such as English are

termed 'stress timed' and others such as Thai or the Chinese language group are termed 'syllable timed' (Deterding and Poedjosoedarmo, 1998). Singaporean English has been characterized as having a rhythm which is 'staccato' (Brown, 1988) due to the syllable timing influence of Chinese and Malay. This timing impacts on the overall intonation curve of an utterance, an important area of spoken grammar.

1.4 The role of intonation

Intonation is the rise and fall in pitch within the utterance in syllable timed languages. The pitch centers on the important stressed syllable that we find within the framework of a breath unit. In other words a stressed syllable at the core of the stressed word will be surrounded by other 'notes' in the utterance which rise or fall. This means that English does not have a pitch change <u>within</u> the syllable, but rather that the marking of importance through extra volume and speech effort is within the collection of syllables making up the utterance. This means that less effort is put into some syllables creating a 'curve' related to meaning. It is a real contrast to languages such as Thai, Vietnamese, Laotian and Chinese where each sound has a pitch related to meaning for each syllable (Chang, 1987).

It is useful to describe these changes in the rise and fall as linked to communicative purpose. The major utility of this is that it may be a new experience for tonal language speakers to both perceive and reproduce the intonation patterns. Numerous texts detail the role of these suprasegmental features, namely patterns of sound usage above the individual sound articulation as in the detailed descriptions in Celce-Murcia, (1996 175-221). What follows are some examples of useful intonation patterns. These patterns focus on internationally recognized patterns of English usage which occur in both North American and British majority usage.

- The falling tone
  Used to signal the end of a statement.
  Wh questions often have a falling tone.
  Marks the last item in a closed list
  Used in tag questions seeking confirmation or agreement
  Creates certainty in a statement or exclamation

- The rising tone
  Indicates a question with an expected yes or no answer
  Used for the items in a closed list which come before the final item
  As part of a question tag seeking information, not confirmation

- The falling-rising tone
  Complex links to conveying attitude or information focus on an item
  Indicates uncertainty, reservation within a statement
  Highlights a particular item

This area is of intonation or 'prosody' is important as working with the intonation contours can occur in classrooms and it links closely to effective communication (Gilbert, 1983, 1993).

1.5 Natural occurrences of redundancy and repetition

Any consideration of the grammar of speaking must note the extensive findings of discourse analysis which reflect the thought processing of performing under time pressure (Cook, 1989; Eggins, 1997; Tsui, 1994). A speaker is likely to organise language differently as there is limited time to decide what to say, how to say it and to check that one's communicative intentions are clear. Speakers then use devices which are markedly different from written modes and these are also devices which would earn the wrath of written assessors. Features which the writer found in pair work for upper primary learners in a TESOL situation are described in work describing the acquisition of vocabulary (Nation, 2001:70,132) and parallel more general description (Bygate, 1987) as well as corpus

findings and learner talk (Carter and McCarthy, 1995; Newton, 1995). The following list summarizes findings and describes how speakers aid production of speech:

- Simplifying structure by tacking sentences on to previous ones through coordinating conjunctions. There is frequent use of 'and'. 'but' etc.
- Using ellipsis whereby syntactic abbreviation can result in questions like How? Which one? On Tuesday the 24th? That old tomorrow?
- Using formulaic expressions such as 'how are you' features in defined functional situations. These include greetings, small talk and idioms
- Buying negotiation of meaning time with time filling devices such as fillers, pauses and phrases
- Rephrasing and repetition which is needed as so much has to be held in the speaker's and listener's memory
- Self correcting and false starts.
- Checking and confirming meaning when driven by a need.

These features are exactly the features which mark conversation or discussion as a difficult set of skills. The same features common to conversation are also those which one does not expect or want to hear in a presentation speech (Hall, 1997). In fact the difficulty is that in the grammar of speech educationalists find features which we dislike in writing and in formal one-way speech. It is to the framework of these features that we now turn.

1.6 The use of interaction and information routines

Genre classification of interaction and information routines is a widening area of research which enables some definition of exactly what occurs in spoken grammar. Clearly the interaction during a casual conversation, a narrative, a service encounter or talk while performing a real life task differs (Carter and Murphy, 1995). Yet it is useful to consider two main areas of interaction routines and information routines.

Interaction routines in specific functional settings are full of the formulaic, that is the kind of language which fills the guide books and language survival type learning (Nation and Crabbe, 1991). These interaction routines parallel the framework of text types and genre analysis in that specific functions and situations require specific spoken language. One has only to look at the extensive publishing in the English for Specific Purposes market to realize that spoken English is defined by topic, purpose, audience and the speaking situation. While the personal recount is a major form of spoken English (Biber et al, 1999) even less open interaction routines occur in workplace English such as in the expanding area of tourism (Hall, 1999). Learning formulaic patterns has a role to play in such situations. In fact role play is a useful tool for developing the routine aspects of spoken grammar.

Information routines are in less bound, defined situations such as conversation or story telling. Less specific information routines have been broadly classified as those involving the presentation of factual information hinging on questions of sequencing or identity of a subject and those which have a more evaluative response aspect (Brown and Yule, 1983). This writer prefers the term 'presentation routines' as Brown and Yule's term of 'exposition routines' may be confusing when compared to written text types.

The following listing of two categories of information routines is useful as some of the vocabulary of spoken forms of the following information routines parallels written forms:

Presentation Routines	Evaluation Routines
description	explanation
narration	justification
instruction	predication
comparison	decision

These routines involve set grammar items, such as sequence words in narratives as well as macro-organizational structures of

use in classroom teaching. The scope of this subject is large and one beyond the scope of this paper. One can find much useful material in genre based syllabi and studies (Australian Curriculum Corporation, 1994). The next section outlines some aspects of teaching grammatical speech.

2. Teaching Grammatical Speech

Introduction

This section briefly outlines some rationale for teaching grammatical speech. Clearly this process begins by recognizing that spoken English differs in features from the written mode. Teachers will also be aware that productive use of English will be more difficult to develop than understanding. The other point is that internationally comprehensible English is a useful aspiration for all learners in an increasingly global marketplace (Warschauer, 2000, Graddol, 1997)

2.1 Developing articulation skills

Pronunciation is an area where instant results cannot be expected but modeling plays an important part. It is useful to highlight to learners that while one is not aspiring to one set model specific sounds can be said wrongly and will lead to misunderstanding. There is a role for highlighting set procedures for mastering specific sounds. Anecdotally the writer has found when training junior army officers in Singapore that many commented that they had never been aware of how their 'voice worked'. It is interesting to note that the use of a teacher's voice is the subject of a recent publication (Maley, 2000) and that pronunciation has been a subject of popular debate in the region. When recent syllabus statements in Singapore (Ministry of Education, 2001) state that P2 students will 'pronounce words clearly' then attention on the mechanics of producing sounds is needed for grammatically sound communication.

2.2 Applying the utterance

The utterance is usually marked in direct speech transcriptions by punctuation boundaries. Learners benefit by being made aware that listeners need the pauses to process information. Techniques for this are most obvious in public speaking training where the 'framing ' of information through pauses is recognized as useful and important. This can be as explicit as adding in slashes and highlighted words so that utterances and stressed syllables re visible for a public speaker. Quite clearly one then develops pauses related to the information units and the stressed information. Guided role plays and dialogues are useful tools for providing opportunities for practice.

2.3 Understanding the role of stress

Stress marking operates at the word and utterance level. 'Big Books' for primary schools provide a lead-in to the modeling of the stress patterns of English. From this stepping stone one can move to the stress links to key words which are usually nouns and sometimes adjectives. When presenting these key words the use of gestures or graphics can highlight the syllable stress. At times the dictionary can be useful as the better dictionaries mark in the stressed syllables.

From the word level, one can integrate the pause boundaries of the utterance with the key words in that utterance. As stated earlier, stress is usually linked to foregrounded information. One may need to overstress with learners from tonal language backgrounds to first develop awareness, yet this stage is useful in building awareness. The writer has found the following acrostic useful in presentation skills training where the stress of speaking in front of a group is not the only area of concern:

Stress
Timing
Rhythm
Intonation
Pausing

2.4 Building intonation awareness

As teachers we often ask many questions yet it important for learners to practise and use questions (Dillion, 1981). Questions provide some of the most obvious examples of the role of intonation and so pairwork is useful as the learners often ask each other for answers in such learning arrangements (Hall, 1996; Newton, 1995). In developing further awareness of intonation patterns listening is also critical along with a range of learning arrangements. With varied learning arrangements in cooperative learning there can be opportunities for communication which will involve a range of intonation patterns.

2.5 Accepting redundancy and repetition

Redundancy is almost an ironic area when it comes to spoken language in the classroom. Teachers continuously repeat and use redundancy so that learners follow instructions. It should be no surprise that this condition is intrinsic to the nature of spoken grammar, particularly when it is not a prepared one-way presentation. The greatest difficulty in working with this factor may in fact be language teachers' acceptance that repetition is a norm of unplanned speech.

2.6 Learning interaction and information routines

Interaction and interaction routines are closely involved with a setting, topic, purpose and the vocabulary and grammar which reflects the situation. Programmes often use these factors to build progress from closed learning situations like scripts to guided dialogues and then to simulations and role plays. It is important to

foster confidence by progressing from safely defined use of formulas to more open scenarios.

Closed texts or scripts with one defined answer may parallel the transmission model of learning where 'being too verbal or asking too many questions might imply impoliteness' (Salleh, 1981). In this way a text in order to be authoritative may be viewed as effective if it provides the set, right answer. A framework which gives the opportunity for learners to make decisions about what to say, how to say it and whether to continue for the specified communicative purpose needs tasks which provide varied choices of responses. Learning would then build on notions of whether what we have said is right or wrong and whether intentions are understood (Bygate, 1987) as there are often many paths to the answer in conversation. The teacher will then need to provide opportunities to progress to many possible answers in order to develop greater fluency. Fluency can then develop alongside accuracy.

3 Applying grammatical speech in the ASEAN classroom

This part of the paper will discuss factors in developing grammatical speech with reference to selected dynamics of learning in ASEAN with particular reference to Singapore, where there is currently a strong national interest in the Speak Good English approach.

The first major question in defining grammatical speech is whose speech provides a model of what is acceptable grammar. The issue of accent and varieties is not a new issue (Noss, 1981). While extensive work in World Englishes documents the rich varieties it is useful to consider that the 'bottom line' for English language communication will be "Can I be understood by the listener?" (Kachru, 1982.) Accents will always exist because the speaker does not speak in the same way as the other who uses the phrase. "You have an accent". The days of aspiring to RP pronunciation are over, yet if all varieties are acceptable there will be a need to target a measure of international comprehensibility. This is especially true when

speakers are not aware of how basilect their variety may be and how incomprehensible it can be to others outside 'the tribe'.

The development of internationally acceptable spoken English involves surmounting a number of problems. This listing is drawn from research in Singapore, yet many points are universal.

1.   Lack of exposure to English. Many children only meet English in the classroom. They are therefore unable to practice English they learn at school.
2.   Learners may lack motivation.
3.   The learner could have a poor command of their mother tongue. The learner whose command of his primary language (in this case, a Chinese dialect) is poor will also have difficulty in learning a second language (Tay, 1993:59).
4.   The learner who has not learnt the art of learning or developed strategies for acquiring new grammar and vocabulary will have difficulties.
5.   Teachers' command of the language will provide the model of usage.
6.   Other subject teachers provide models of the grammar of English. 'If they have an inadequate command of the language or if they have negative attitudes towards the language, their students will also be adversely affected'. (ibid:60)
7.   Overcrowding: 'in large classes of over 40 children, effective language learning cannot take place because the children do not have enough opportunity to practice speaking'. (ibid :60).
8.   Examination pressure. If pressure is a factor and marks drive the students' learning then there needs to be a link between examination structures and syllabi to foster performance.

(Adapted from Tay M.W.J. 1993 58-62. First written as a paper requested by the Ministry of Education, Singapore August 1979.)

Conclusion

Trends towards multi-nationalism, in which English is shared between non-native speakers of English, make the recognition of effective oral communication increasingly important. As global business extends into new market places people will be talking to each other more and more and for better or worse, the lingua franca is English (see the discussion in Graddol, 1997 and Warshauer, 2000). The new work skills of the 21st century include telecommunication, presentation skills and sharing information as we move towards a knowledge based economy.

In the changing world economy, there is little choice for successful communicators as we must understand the nature of spoken English. Speaking grammatically is a global skill.

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