

Adjustments in teacher language with different level students

Louise Haynes
Narzan University

Summary

Veterans as well as teachers who are just starting out in the EFL field may not be aware of the different ways they address students of differing levels of proficiency. By making these differences explicit, teacher trainers can guide teachers to communicate more effectively in the classroom. This paper summarises the most important points of teacher talk adjustments, based on the example of a common classroom event, the narration of a personal story.

Introduction

The term foreigner talk (FT) has been described as "the language that native speakers use when addressing non-native speakers" (Ellis 1997, p. 45). Two main types of modification have been identified: ungrammatical modification, including possible omission of grammatical features, expansion and replacement / rearrangement (Ellis 1994, p. 252); and grammatical modification, including simplification, regularization and elaboration (ibid p. 256).

Ungrammatical FT may include such features as exaggerated intonation, omission of articles and certain auxiliary verb forms, deletion of pronouns or substituting them with names, using foreign or foreign-sounding words. Native speakers may produce ungrammatical FT when speaking with very low-level, rather than higher-level, non-native speakers. Ungrammatical FT has also been used to imply a superior status over the non-native speaker. (ibid p. 252-254).

Grammatical FT tends to be well structured and slower, with more clearly pronounced language, shorter and less complex utterances, and a simpler choice of lexical items (see Long 1996). However, regularization and elaboration can often result in more complexity for the non-native speaker. With elaboration, for example, a speaker may add more detail in an attempt to give clarity to the meaning, but may, at the same time, overload the non-native speaker with too much information.

In this study, the researcher asked an experienced and well-regarded EFL expert-teacher at a language school in Japan to tell the same story to two different groups of learners: a beginning group of six learners just finishing a first year basic-level course (Group B); and an intermediate group of three learners (Group I). The teacher elected to tell the learners the story of her journey across the United States by bicycle. At the beginning of both tellings, the teacher drew a simple map on the board to provide some visual assistance to the learners. The teacher, who was familiar with all but one of the learners, was instructed simply to try to make sure the learners understood the story. No further instructions were given. After the tellings, all the learners indicated that they had clearly understood the story. Both tellings of the story were audio-recorded, then transcribed by the researcher.



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Analysis

The teacher spoke approximately 720 words with Group B in 00:06:18, compared with 2 995 words in 00:24:40 with Group I, a longer and more elaborate telling. However, importantly the average speed was not dissimilar, approximately 114 wpm in Group B and 121 wpm in Group I, both not much slower than the speed of normal speech. Research indicates that it is better not to significantly slow speech down for beginners; grammatical simplification, vocabulary modification and pausing are more effective, and this is elaborated in the next sections.

Modification

Simplifying grammatical structures for beginning learners is highly appropriate. In our case study, the majority of sentences in the Group B telling were a series of short fully-formed phrases, combined with conjunctions "and", "because", "or", and "so". With the Group I learners, however, sentences were filled out with more advanced structures such as [so + adj + that] and [thought about + V + ing]. There were also more complex tenses, "he may have thought that we were stupid for riding..."; and more colloquial structures, such as "You could tell it was, like, on purpose...". Most teachers are proficient at modifying their grammatical structures to match their students' levels; reassure teachers that this is appropriate. Obviously, concentrating on the structures that the learners have recently learned would also be

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Ungrammatical modification when speaking with non-native speakers, such as omitting articles, should be avoided. For example, in the case of our expert teacher, no ungrammatical modifications were found in the Group I transcript, and only one for Group B, the omission of the article in "sometimes in hotel".

Vocabulary modification is more common than grammatical simplification. Table 1 gives a comparison of vocabulary/phrase structures used with each group in our study. The vocabulary used with the basic group is much simpler, with general categories used instead of hyponyms.

Table 1 Comparison of language used with Basic and Intermediate groups

BASIC (Group B)	INTERMEDIATE (Group I)
slow pace	gradual pace
you can see all around here	it's very easy to see everything that's around you
blew his horn	beeping the horn
cooking things	cooking utensils
worried	concerned
if someone attacked us	if someone tried to mug us or attack us

Our expert teacher defined or elaborated vocabulary more often for her intermediate learners than her beginning learners. For example, a slug was defined as "a slimy, big, fat, worm-looking thing". This greater elaboration of vocabulary may represent a significant source of lingual input for intermediate learners, and should be encouraged. It helps intermediate learners develop the capacity to define words that they do not know or have forgotten, so they can continue speaking.



Intermediate learners can learn how to switch time sequences and mark detours, as our expert teacher did, using "In fact..." and "...actually it was kind of interesting...", or to bring the topic back on track with "Ok, so, anyway, ...".

There is a tendency for teachers to alter intonation patterns or other phonological features, as they believe that these increase learner comprehension. To a certain degree this may be true, but this should not occur to the point of distorting speech. The teacher in this case study did not alter intonation patterns, yet could successfully convey the story to both groups. Teachers should be cautioned against relying on this technique to improve comprehension, and encouraged to use other modifications instead.

Discourse

Telling a story in chronological order, as our expert teacher did with Group B, aids comprehension for such beginner learners. It is more challenging and therefore appropriate for an intermediate group, however, for the story to jump back and forth in order to elaborate or clarify. Intermediate learners can learn how to switch time sequences and mark detours, as our expert teacher did, using "In fact..." and "...actually it was kind of interesting...", or to bring the topic back on track with "Ok, so, anyway, ...". The teacher also elaborated the story to a greater degree for Group I than Group B.

Comprehension checks have been found to occur frequently in FT (Ellis 1994), perhaps too frequently. Our expert teacher did not use verbal checks such as "ok?" often, as she relied on her learners' body language instead. The teacher using comprehension checks too often can be an annoying distraction from the storytelling. Teachers should encourage their students to indicate their understanding clearly verbally or by using their faces. On the other hand, direct questions such as "Do you know what a slug is?" and "You know a snail?" can be used to focus learners on particular lexical items. Our expert teacher used them more often with intermediate learners than beginning learners, consistent with her focusing more fully on vocabulary elaboration with intermediate learners.

Anaphoric references can be difficult for beginner learners, but are appropriate for intermediate learners. Our expert teacher used them only with Group I, with "those people" referring to "some people in Iowa", and "they" referring to "the people in the restaurant". They can be used with beginner learners if there is adequate redundancy to make the meaning clear, however. Generally, beginner learners are less able to infer meaning, but intermediate learners can. For example, when speaking with Group I, the teacher began one sentence but did not finish it, "...so we had to wait until the doctor...". The speaker assumed that the listeners understood the meaning from the context. Teachers need to be quite explicit with beginner learners, but be increasingly natural and implicit as learners improve.

Learners enjoy simple colloquial expressions such as "like", "you know", "yeah", and "stuff like that", and their use does not seem to impede comprehension even for beginner learners. In the study, there was generally little difference in the amount of colloquial expressions used in the two tellings. However, these phrases occurred with greater frequency toward the end of the story with Group I, with fifteen in the last four minutes. In this part of the telling, the story was quite similar if not identical in places to an exchange between native speakers. As learners become more proficient, more complex colloquial expressions should be used more often.

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The most salient feature found in the transcripts was that the intermediate learners were more active participants than the beginning learners. Group I students responded with frequent back-channel responses, clarification requests, bids for turns, selecting and relinquishing topics; all properties of negotiation by native speakers (McCarthy 1991). There was almost no active participation in establishing meaning by the Group B learners. This is largely due to their inadequate language capacity. Teachers can demonstrate this by, for example, holding a simultaneous dialogue with themselves, persona A being the storyteller, persona B responding, clarifying, and negotiating for meaning. Asking the learners to shadow (repeat) persona B's responses will help them develop a capacity for more active participation.

Conclusion

Here are fourteen points for making teachers better communicators with their beginner and intermediate level learners:

Speed and Pacing

- slow speech only slightly
- pause frequently, to give students time to understand the story
- make shorter phrases with beginner level learners

Story-telling

- tell the story in chronological order with beginner learners
- keep the story simple for beginner learners, but elaborate story with intermediate learners

Grammatical Structures

- use simple grammatical structures, (e.g. use simple conjunctions for linking)
- be careful of using anaphoric references (e.g. them / their) with beginner learners

Vocabulary

- use simpler vocabulary with beginner learners
- BUT define or elaborate more difficult vocabulary with intermediate learners
- regularize your speech with beginner learners, but not with intermediate learners
- use simple colloquial expressions with beginner learners, but progressively increase complexity with intermediate learners

Do NOT ...

- make ungrammatical modifications
- alter intonation patterns unnaturally
- use too many comprehension checks

Relating personal stories to students is an activity that students enjoy as it lets them learn more about their teacher. It is also a useful teaching tool that promotes students' active listening and conversation skills. With certain simple adjustments to their speech patterns, teachers can make the process much more effective for learners of different levels.

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