

## ENHANCING CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: A MODELLING POTENTIAL FOR CONTENT TEACHERS

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*ABSTRACT. All teachers, irrespective of their 'subject', contribute to the development of their pupils' language and languages. Although not primarily responsible for language 'teaching', content teachers in CLIL will not only be producing much of the raw data from which learners will formulate hypotheses regarding use, they will also be spontaneously responding to that use. This is a practical discussion, illustrated with examples from the spoken component of the British National Corpus, examining ways in which content teachers, via the modelling implicit in classroom discourse, can enhance the linguistic input and feedback which they provide and encourage students to use a wider range of meaning-making, negotiation and politeness strategies.*

*KEY WORDS: Classroom Discourse, Modelling, Discourse Markers, Negotiating Meaning, Politeness Strategies.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION: CONTENT TEACHERS, LANGUAGE TEACHERS

CLIL implies the integration of content and language. One of the challenges facing many current CLIL programmes in their day to day implementation lies in the assigning of pedagogic responsibilities. The departmental mergers and cross-curricular collaboration implicit in CLIL can be expected to lead content teachers and language teachers to reassess their roles and responsibilities. Language teachers, primarily responsible for the “nuts and bolts” (Marsh and Langé 2000: 3) will quite possibly be feeling relieved that the task of providing authentic, communicative opportunities –generally accepted to be of vital importance, will now be shared. Language teachers are probably used to dealing with content (albeit in a haphazard way). Content teachers, however, may not necessarily be used to having to think so much about language, and will likely be asking themselves how they can aid their students' L2 development (see for example the results of a survey conducted with content teachers in the Netherlands in Wilkinson 2005). In this chapter we

will suggest that by becoming more aware of the unscripted spoken language of the classroom and deliberately using and encouraging a wider lexical range, content teachers can provide an enriched linguistic environment for learners.

The discussion uses three ‘little’ English words *OK*, *What?* and *Please*, and examples from the spoken component of the British National Corpus, to examine aspects of three key areas of communication: the organisation of discourse, the negotiation of meaning and the establishment of power relationships, and to discuss ways in which content teachers can enhance the linguistic input and feedback which they provide and encourage students to use a wider range of meaning-making, negotiation and politeness strategies. Although English words are used, this discussion is not restricted to ELT; the suggestions are relevant to any language teaching situation, even L1.

It is herein assumed that content teachers are implicit language teachers (Stein 1999). While the content implies specific vocabulary and specific skills (see for example Cocking and Chipman 1998 or Barwell, Leung, Morgan, and Street 2005 on the language of maths, or Lemke 1990 on talking science) and while the primary focus is on these aspects, content teachers are also constantly modelling natural language (thus providing input) and responding to students output (thus providing feedback). This is actually as true of L1 content teachers as it is of L2 content teachers. All teachers deal with language, and to a certain extent all teachers teach language (Rosen 1969; Bullock 1975; Britton 1992 (1970); Coyle 1999; Clair 2000; Fillmore and Snow 2000; Adger, Snow and Christian 2003; Cameron 2007).

## 2. CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

### 2.1. SPOKEN LANGUAGE

This discussion will centre on the unscripted spoken language of classroom discourse. We will suggest that if teachers can become more aware of certain features of discourse, they will be able to provide enhanced input through the use of a wider and thence more meaningful lexical range. Before going any further, we should pause and reflect upon the nature of spoken language. Extracts from the British National Corpus spoken component are used in the present discussion for illustrative purposes. They were all recorded in educational contexts<sup>1</sup>. Something which corpus-based studies of language have demonstrated quite clearly is that spoken language is very different from written language. Consider the extract below:

so it's more, it's more, oh right Yeah but sometimes actually it's a more, you know, kind of it's, it's, it's not really because they've got problems but it's just because they, they're, they're, they're sort of more diligent and more, you know, more motivated but erm yeah (JYN).

This extract serves to illustrate the on-line processing aspect of unplanned speech. We make it up as we go along –quite literally. In genuine communicative speech, we are

concentrating on the content of our message and on getting it across. Its actual form, from any kind of formal grammatical perspective is secondary. We do not speak in the same way that we write: we repeat, reformulate, hedge and acknowledge our interlocutors as we construct, manipulate and negotiate meaning. We do not speak in sentences.

## 2.2. LEXICAL COMPETENCE

Recognising that formal, structural, sentence-based grammar is not so important in spoken language leads us to reassess priorities. We can make two observations regarding the speaker above: (1) they seem comfortably fluent with the language, using a wide range of discourse markers to mould their message and (2) they appear to employ a fairly sophisticated vocabulary as evidenced in their use of a word like *diligent*. Both of these factors are lexical. Although it is difficult to measure, lexical competence is fundamental to linguistic competence (Meara 1996). The positive implications both within and outside of the educational system of a wider lexical range are many and obvious. It thus follows that teachers, in their role as model, should be attempting to use as wide a range as possible.

In the current discussion, rather than ‘big’ words, like *diligent* (which are likely to come later on in the process) we are going to consider ‘little’ words. Words which slip in, almost unnoticed, and which have a tendency to be perhaps too frequent if we are going to adopt a diversity-in-modelling stance. When writing, we (or our proofreaders) usually spot words which we have overused and insert alternatives but the nature of speech requires pre-emptive action in order to avoid undesired repetition. In the first instance this implies becoming more conscious of what we are saying. This is a task for the ‘reflective practitioner’ (Waters 2006).

## 3. ORGANISATION, NEGOTIATION AND TONALITY: MOULDING MEANING

Three ‘little’ yet frequent words *Okay*, *What?* and *Please* are here employed to explore aspects of three key areas of communicative competence: the organisation of meaning, the negotiation of meaning and the tonality of meaning. *Ok* is an example, perhaps the example par excellence, of a discourse marker: the tools employed in production to organise and manage meaning and in reception, via backchannelling to signal (in)comprehension and (dis)agreement. *What?* is here taken to represent a stereotypical response to incomprehension and will allow us to reflect upon breakdowns in meaning and how they are dealt with. Finally *Please* may be said to set the tone –superficially as an indicator of formality, although we will see that the concept is a touch euphemistic. At each stage we will begin with a rapid sketch of the communicative concept itself before looking at evidence from the corpus. We will then reflect upon how the language in question could be enriched and what the potential benefits for the learners might be. In the final section we will explore ways in which practitioners can incorporate these ideas into their teaching.

## 3.1. THE ORGANISATION OF DISCOURSE: MAKING MEANING

What we are here calling discourse markers can be defined as the sounds, words and chunks we use to check and signal comprehension and agreement, to clarify our intentions, to interrupt or cede, to resume or to close or to announce new or unexpected information, to edit or soften our message or to stall while we formulate. They correspond to the textual (within the clause) and logical (clause complex) metafunctions (Halliday 1994). Given such a wide range of functions, there are of course many examples (the commentaries in Carter and McCarthy 1997, provide rich insights into discourse markers in speech; see also Schrifin 1987). Nonetheless, there is also a tendency for some speakers to over-rely on certain markers. The discourse marker which is probably most often over-employed is *OK*<sup>2</sup> and it is for that reason that it has been chosen to illustrate the present discussion. *OK* has become a quasi-universal marker, in itself a linguistic sign of globalisation. That it is recognised as a significant word can be seen in it having its own etymological myths. This also means that it is not a word which the vast majority of learners need to learn, as they likely already know and use it.

Consider the following extract of teacher talk:

No? Okay. Say so, I mean you don't have to do this. Er, when oh well, okay. Everybody got an idea of all this is going? Ooh dear! Okay. Johnson, just debating, we're getting on to the whole idea of Johnson's world and the link though it worked out the same I'd say. Okay. The link is satire. Okay. Now this is a simplified construction, somewhat. Two basic definitions. One the oldest which comes from pre-Roman times, okay? Means, basically, thespian merrymaking. With any sort of thespian celebration and this is pre-Roman okay? (KPV).

At the outset we must acknowledge that this example does contain a healthy selection of discourse markers: *I mean, Er, oh well, Ooh dear! I'd say, Now, somewhat* and *basically* can all be interpreted as contributing to the making of meaning. Yet it also contains seven occurrences of *OK* in a stretch of ninety three words. Admittedly, if we had recourse to the actual recording, there would be prosodic differences which would go some way to distinguishing functional intent. If it were normal conversation, this could pass without comment; but we have stated that in the classroom the teacher is a model and our aim is to enhance input. The extract includes, on average, one *OK* every thirteen words. The average production rate, for public speaking is taken to be 100-120 words a minute. If this teacher were to talk for thirty minutes in a lesson, smattering *OKs* at the same rate, we can expostulate somewhere in the region of 250 occurrences. The basic contention here is that that represents a sorely wasted opportunity.

Consider this modified version of the same extract:

No? *No problem*. Say so, I mean you don't have to do this. Er, when oh well, *okey dokey*. Everybody got an idea of all this is going? Ooh dear! *So*. Johnson, just debating, we're getting on to the whole idea of Johnson's world and the link though it worked out the same I'd say. *Right*. The link is satire. *Is that clear?* Now this is a

simplified construction, somewhat. Two basic definitions. One the oldest which comes from pre-Roman times, *you see?* Means, basically, thespian merrymaking. With any sort of thespian celebration and this is pre-Roman *isn't it*

The second version is not only lexically richer –if we consider discourse markers as lexical items, it is also more meaningful in that it makes things more explicit: we can posit face-saving with *No problem*; checking and reformulation introduced with *So*; new information prefaced by *Right*; checking again with *Is that clear?*; the marking of new information with *you see?* (as distinct from the affirmation of shared information with *you know*) and the reaffirmation of information with the final tag *isn't it*. It incorporates and thus models and offers a wider range of meaning making devices than the original.

The underlying belief here is that if exposed regularly to a more diverse selection of meaning-making tools, learners will benefit. It will help them to hone their receptive skills: research by Jung (2003) has shown that an increased use of what she calls ‘discourse cues’ can improve aural comprehension, even in passive listening exercises. The supposition here is that learners will also incorporate at least some of this language into their own active, productive repertoire making them more efficient communicators<sup>3</sup>.

Modern classrooms are idealised as learner-centred environments where everyone is actively involved in negotiating and making meaning. Indeed, the more learner-centred a classroom is, the more negotiation is likely (Antón 1999). This has positive L2 learning corollaries: a speaker with partial competences is going to need negotiation skills therefore giving learners the opportunity to practise and refine them should be a priority<sup>4</sup>. From a production/reception perspective, this takes us beyond comprehensible input or output and into the realms of “participatory” input (Coyle 1999: 51). The listener too has a crucial role to play: ‘lubricating’ discourse and keeping it going (Van Lier, in Clifton 2006: 144). Backchannelling refers to signals used to show a speaker that the listener is following and open to more –*OK, Uhuh, I see, No Way!*– a wide range of discourse markers come into play here as well. Yet it is also the listener’s responsibility to signal (or sometimes to mask) incomprehension: a breakdown in meaning and thus the need for negotiation.

### 3.2. THE NEGOTIATION OF DISCOURSE: MENDING MEANING

This brings us onto *What?* our second illustrative word. We should perhaps emphasise the illustrative nature of *What?* here; we could perhaps have chosen *Huh?*, a more international version (or even *Repeat please*, a classroom favourite –to which we will return later on). The point is that the words represent a reductionist expression of incomprehension without clarifying cause, thereby leaving the speaker at a loss as to the actual reason for the breakdown and impeding smooth repair.

There are at least four primary factors involved in listening comprehension:

- 1) Audibility: By audibility we mean the actual fact of being able to hear. This incorporates both the appropriacy of the volume of production and non-obtrusive levels of background noise.
- 2) Attention: This relates to the willingness of the listener to hear. We might gloss it as the volume of reception and non-obtrusive levels of internal noise. Factors relating to motivation and interest also come into play here, particularly in the classroom: a listener's attention may be diverted by positive as well as ('educationally' speaking) negative factors. They may be day-dreaming, yet they may also be engrossed in pair or group work or self-directed discourse (on the latter, see Casal, this volume).
- 3) Recognition: Comprehension also implies recognizing what we hear: the sounds in conjunction, and the words they form and, to some degree at least, knowing what the words represent. This implies accessing the mental lexicon.
- 4) Perception: The final step involves making sense of the words in particular combinations: cognitively perceiving the meaning in the message. Extra-linguistic factors such as world knowledge and kinaesthetics will come into play here.

Once comprehension has 'happened', there is a next step: acceptance. This implies evaluating the message. Reliability and truth assessment come into play, often affected by previous expectations. If the message is shocking or believed to be untrustworthy, it may also provoke a *What* though perhaps a *What!* rather than a *What?* This will involve negotiation on a different, arguably higher, level.

Teachers, in their role as listeners, can actively model enhanced negotiation strategies. We often rely on gesture –a hand cupping the ear or a facial expression to show students that there is a problem but presumably we want students to be able to develop the verbal skills necessary for dealing with these situations. Cupping a hand to an ear may not be appropriate in all situations. If so, we should make sure that we accompany the gesture with appropriate language. Students should also be encouraged to be more explicit in their signalling. The table below sets out a range of basic options for clarifying comprehension problems. There are many other possibilities and teachers should take these as no more than illustrative. The table deliberately includes ambiguous examples. In theory, lower level and younger learners could be encouraged to use these phrases as a first step, beginning by distinguishing between *I didn't hear* (audibility/attention) and *I don't understand* (recognition/perception) and more competent users could also employ them as face-saving devices.

TABLE 1. *A Range of Basic Options for Clarifying Comprehension Problems*

audibility	attention
I'm sorry...I didn't hear... I didn't catch what you said...	
I'm sorry...I couldn't hear Could you speak up please	I'm sorry...I wasn't listening I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention
recognition	perception
I don't understand. I'm lost!	
What's a X? What does X mean? I don't know what X is.	What do you mean? I didn't get what you said about... I couldn't follow the bit about...
acceptance	
Do you mean to say... You must be joking!	

Clarifying the cause of a breakdown at the same time as one signals the need for repair should contribute to the flow. Encouraging this kind of behaviour has several positive corollaries. In becoming used to recognizing and signalling the causes of breakdown, learners should begin to monitor their own listening more carefully and, in doing so, become more effective listeners and thence more effective communicators (Lynch 1996: 89). If learners become more reflective, they may well be more open to the process side of things and thence to the idea of learning to learn rather than memorising lists. As commented on above, acquiring these habits goes beyond purely linguistic competence and embraces socio-pragmatic competence in itself a pan-linguistic skill, therefore these gains are unlikely to be restricted to any one language.

### 3.3. THE TONALITY OF DISCOURSE - MASKING MEANING?

The multi-applicability factor may not be so true of our final word. We noted that *OK* has international status and that *What?* could just as well be an intonationally-inflected grunt to signal incomprehension but the same is not true of *Please*. From a purely lexical perspective, *Please* might be posited as equivalent to *Por favor*, *Bitte* or *S'il te plait*; yet different politeness strategies in different cultures, from both macro and micro perspectives, lead us to suppose that their actual uses will differ and therefore from a socio-pragmatic perspective equivalence would no longer hold. The 'please' in *S'il te plait* is arguably not the same as the *please* in *S'il vous plait*. These factors are

integral to language learning (Met 2006) although they are not without their problems. Acknowledging that politeness strategies are culture specific only forces us to admit that culture is a highly fuzzy concept. Culture, like beauty...

Nonetheless, whatever the language and whatever the culture, classroom discourse is going to have to deal with giving instructions, commands and warnings; making requests and asking for permission –all of which are highly dependent on (real and perceived) social roles, and are thus potentially face-threatening. A generalised gloss for *Please* would probably identify it as a politeness marker. If we compare the giving of commands with the making of requests, however, surely the difference rests on the distinction between power and solidarity for which ‘politeness’ is perhaps no more than a euphemism (Brown and Gilman, 1960/1972; Fox, 2004:97). In an idealised, learner-centred classroom the balance of power should be more evenly distributed than in the traditional teacher-fronted classrooms of yore; though this will not just happen; it will require a commitment and pro-active modelling. It is here suggested that we need to reflect upon the way that we actually use words, especially the little words. Examining the use of *Please* in classroom talk reveals clear patterns. Consider the extracts below:

Now, first of all No, don’t speak, just listen please listen that includes you. (JJR)

Shh! Settle down please. Quiet please. These people can stay behind when assembly’s out. People! Andrew! Listen carefully please. (KCK)

... your homework is make sure that all the work previous to this on the acid rain is complete and shh quiet please. (KP3)

Okay. So we can all answer question one Leon? Yeah flute. The answer to question one please. Flute. Flute thank you (FMC)

This is archetypical teacher talk: Full and truncated imperatives tempered with *Please*. Dalton-Puffer and Nikula (2006: 256-8) label this an indirectness strategy, recognising that teachers tend to avoid bare imperatives. The degree to which the above can really be considered ‘polite’, nonetheless, is debatable. These are not requests; the addressees are being told, not asked, to do. We should acknowledge that there are occasions when this pattern can be highly useful. If the desired action truly is imperative, it provides an economical and effective way of expressing the need, and it is less harsh than a brusque command. It also has a logical attraction for use with younger or lower level learners, who may not possess the lexico-grammatical or pragmatic finesse necessary for more complicated language:

Dark. Well done. And your last word? Spiky. Spiky. Very good indeed. Hands down please. Now listen...(F72)

At the same time we must not forget that we are modelling. Dalton-Puffer and Nikula discuss examples of students giving truncated commands to each other and conclude that it signals a solidarity move rather than a pragmatic lack (2006: 261). If the use were restricted to peer interaction, we could count it a success; yet (harking back to



the previous section discussing negotiation of meaning) in this researcher's experience, both teaching and observing in the classroom and as an external oral examiner, students, of all ages and levels, and from a wide variety of L1 cultures, request repetition (signal a breakdown) with chunks like "Repeat please" or "Again please" which suggests that they have picked the structure up as being appropriate for stressful moments (incomprehension) without having had the opportunity to reflect upon the 'politeness perspective'. This use is not always socio-pragmatically appropriate. In line with the general hypothesis of this discussion then, the argument is that we should not ignore opportunities to model a wider range. Consider the selection below:

...erm, if there are any questions please feel free to ask. (F71)

...this morning when I give you these sheets will you please write your name and today's date at the top of the sheet... (F7R)

Would you please bring your chairs and that table over here so that we're all together round this table thank you. (FMC)

Sir, is Miss not in? No. Could you take your coats off please and come into the blue room. (F77)

Thank you for your attention. If you'd like to go into the next room, please. (F77)

Let's have a look at this finger. Gentlemen can we have a bit of quiet please? Assif, Neil, Colin. What did you do to that finger, Lisa? (FLY)

Have any of you ever seen a seal? Shh. Good. Now one or two people have got something they want to ask. So let's listen please. (F72)

If students are regularly exposed to a representative sample of possibilities, such as the one above, there are various use-based factors that they may be able to pick up osmotically. From a grammatical perspective we are adding conditional forms, modals and *let's* to the range of request formulae; we are also demonstrating that *Please* can be found at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the clause. We may also be planting the seeds which will allow students to become more aware of the importance of politeness strategies in cross-cultural communication.

#### 4. THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

If content teachers want to help their learners' linguistic development, and CLIL explicitly assumes that they do, they need to hone monitoring skills. The first step towards enhanced classroom discourse must involve awareness-raising –in the sense of becoming aware of what is actually being said. Both what we are saying and what our learners are saying. Introspection can be a highly useful tool of professional development. It can be difficult to monitor discourse consecutively –as observed previously, we are focused on the message rather than its manifestation. Classroom observation either by trainers or peers can be a useful tool here, as can recordings and

transcriptions. If you listen to what you and your colleagues and your students are saying, you will discover patterns. You may well recognise things you have 'taught' without realising it<sup>5</sup>. You will be able to pick up on things which need fine-tuning. We made the point at the outset that all teachers contribute to their students' linguistic evolution. Actively employing and encouraging the use of a wider range of 'little' words can contribute significantly to this goal.

## 5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Employing *Ok*, *What?* and *Please* as representative examples, we have looked at three key meaning-making tools: the organisation of discourse, the signalling of comprehension and the expression of solidarity/power. It has been suggested that use of a wider lexical range can enrich meaning and that by paying more attention to classroom language, becoming more aware of what is being said and proactively modelling and encouraging a wider range of language the content teacher can contribute to their learners' linguistic development.

## NOTES

There are not many books on the market dealing specifically with these features from a classroom teaching perspective although two notable exceptions are Keller and Warner (1988) and Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992).

1. The code after each extract identifies the text.
2. Although there are, of course, exceptions - last summer I attended a 60 minute lecture given for EAP students in Britain by a Scottish lecturer who averaged eight *yeahs* a minute.
3. L1 users presented with extracts of L2 speech rate those with a frequent use of discourse markers more highly, considering them more fluent (Prodromou, 2007).
4. This too is true of L1 users. We would not expect a five year old to have the same L1 communicative competence as a sixteen year old. Ergo, this is something which will develop during their formative years, at school.
5. Anecdotal evidence from teacher-training workshops suggests this is always the case.

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