

Monitoring speaking

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As teachers I think we all accept that there is a role for correcting student speech in the language classroom. However, in my experience this tends to take place either when students are speaking in open class - when all other students can hear them and they are under enormous performance pressure, or on a personal, one-to-one level, which naturally excludes other students in the class.

Student speech in group or pair work, although not a perfect recreation of real-life communicative situations, does provide us with a better model of the English students use outside the classroom. It therefore follows that this is the language production they need and want us to correct as teachers. The most common way of doing this is to monitor student speech during pair or group work and correct it either there and then or in a follow-up stage.

Aiding real communication

One negative consequence of the Communicative Approach, which has taken an ever stronger hold over English language teaching over the last two decades, is the increased neglect of language in the language classroom. The common practice of setting up communication activities in which students spend large amounts of class time speaking to one another and which is preceded or followed by language input from the course book ignores the fact that students can do this perfectly well in their own time with some friends and a grammar book. It would seem obvious that a good language teacher is one who can create an environment in which their students communicate naturally in the language and are provided with help on how to express what **they** want to say. In order to aid real communication then, we as teachers must directly address the problems our students have with English by listening to them in the most natural setting possible and improving that use of language.

Problems with monitoring student speech

In my experience, teachers often complain about not being able to hear students properly when they are involved in group or pair work activities. Other teacher complaints may include not wanting to disrupt the activity with their presence or even that students don't want them listening in on their private conversations with other students. Here are some problems teachers have with monitoring and some possible solutions:

- *I can't get near enough to my students to hear them.*

It is clearly important to get physically close to pairs or groups when attempting to monitor their speech. Depending on the spatial layout of the classroom this may be easy, difficult or impossible. I have taught company classes where it was impossible to get close to pairs when they spoke to one another, which meant I had to invent a method for listening to their speech. This may involve moving the students for the communication activity to somewhere they can be heard, or changing seating positions so that you get to hear a different pair or group for every new activity. The important thing is to address the logistical problem and find a way of hearing your students' speech.

- I can't make out exactly what they are saying.*
 Students mumbling or speaking softly make it difficult to hear their use of English. It is therefore important to encourage them to speak clearly if you are to be able to give them language feedback on what they have said. If you are not used to doing it, it takes time to develop the technique of selective listening. What I mean by this is ignoring the other conversations in the classroom and tuning in to just one pair or group. This can sometimes be done by watching the mouth of the person you are listening to.
- I can't hear any errors.*
 We become accustomed to hearing how the students speak English in our country, their translations of set phrases or use of wrong words or false friends, and we forget what a native speaker or English speaker of another nationality would fail to understand. My solution for this is to write down anything you hear that just sounds wrong or strange. You will often find that by analysing it calmly on the piece of paper you suddenly see why it sounds strange and have time to think of what they were trying to say and phrase it in more accessible English.

I often put whole sentences on the board for the class to consider and say "I'm not sure what this means, can anyone explain it?" It is surprising how often the rest of the class do understand it and perceive it to be comprehensible because it was said by someone from the same language background, but it nevertheless requires the teacher's rephrasing in English for its true meaning to be uncovered. The discussion of meanings of words arising from this practice is also a source of great interest and learning for me and my students.
- I don't want to disrupt the communication activity.*
 Students may go quiet or stop the activity to ask you a question if you move close to them. This is not usually a problem as long as you can answer them efficiently and get them back on task. The only solution is to monitor more unobtrusively, which can be achieved by avoiding eye contact and trying not to distract students. Provided you have explained the rationale for your note-taking and students are aware of the procedures, this should not be a problem.
- I can't write down all their errors.*
 You don't need to. We are looking for student errors that will affect their communication in a given situation. When writing down an example of an error, which may be an entire sentence, we will miss other mistakes being made by the same or other students in the group. This is irrelevant, the important thing is to be selective and note down errors representative of the class or level, so that subsequent correction is relevant to as many students as possible.
- I'm not attending to all students during the activity.*
 Provided students are aware of your aim in monitoring, you spread your attention evenly around the class, you remain attentive to student questions from other groups during the activity and students are aware of this procedure and the rationale before you start group or pair work, there will be no complaints that you are ignoring some students and only correcting some.

The practicalities of effective monitoring

- Explain to students what you are doing and why. The first question to ask is "Do you want me to correct you when you make a mistake?" You will probably receive a unanimous "Yes!" from all students. Tell them that when they are speaking you will go round listening for errors with a pen and paper and correct them afterwards so as not to interrupt the conversation. This process is part of learner training, letting students in on the methodology so that it enjoys their support and therefore functions correctly.
- You need a pen and paper and to be able to get close enough to all pairs or groups to hear what everyone is saying. Be aware of this before you start and resolve any spatial problems then.
- Let students begin the activity and make some progress before starting to monitor their student talk. If you sit straight down with a pair or group they can find it difficult to get going.
- Discriminate when deciding how long you spend monitoring groups. Keep looking around at other pairs or groups to make sure they are on task or don't need you for something. Always be prepared to leave one group and go to another group to deal with a linguistic or procedural question. Give students the impression that you are available to everyone even though you are only listening to a few of them at any one time.
- Make sure that your notes are legible and you know what the error was. I tend to split my page into three parts: grammar, pronunciation and lexis. With the former and latter I write down exactly what the student said, because then I can see the error when I look back at it later. With pronunciation you will need some visual form of noting down the problem, such as phonemic symbols, stress marks, arrows etc. otherwise you will forget the error when you go up to correct it on the board.
- Another advantage of monitoring student speech for subsequent language feedback is that it gives you time to consider how to correct the error, which is not the case with on-the-spot correction. Use monitoring time to consider what and how you will correct for the whole class.

Conclusions

I have observed many lessons by teachers who have students communicating in English for the main part of the lesson, producing huge amounts of language which then often goes uncorrected or acknowledged. This language represents a reflection of our students' ability and is the most valuable source of input we could find for our classes, far more valuable than the generalised lesson aims of a teachers book. Your students will appreciate you addressing their own specific problems with the language. Developing an effective procedure for monitoring your students' language does take time, organisation and the complicity of the students, but good language feedback undeniably makes classes more relevant for learners and teachers alike.

Further reading

'Correction' by M.Bartram &R.Walton Thomson Heinle (2002)