

Teaching Notes

Building a Bridge Between Instruction and Practice

Beth Sheppard, University of Oregon

Why do some students easily move through the lessons and tasks of a class, but finish with little change in their language skills? As teachers, what have we neglected in our instruction? In my high-intermediate intensive listening and speaking classes, I have often found that my students increased their comfort and range of self-expression, but not their accuracy, despite opportunities for task-based, communicative practice and formal instruction in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar.

Both instruction about language form and content-focused communication practice are essential, but I have become convinced that it is also essential to build a bridge between the two, and that this third, linking element is often neglected.

In recent terms, my approach to building a bridge between instruction and practice has been to teach students to listen carefully to their own spoken production, to analyze and reflect on it, and to become more aware of how they speak. I do this by having them record each other in groups every week. The recordings are of monologues produced spontaneously in response to questions about topics we have been studying in class. Each student speaks for 1-2 minutes, and the recordings are made in small groups. Then the digital files are distributed to the speakers and each student transcribes his or her own speech, as well as completing various correction and reflection assignments throughout the process.

For example, after studying pronunciation rules related to sentence stress, students are asked to first correct any mistakes they see in their transcript and then circle the stressed syllables of content words. They read the script with attention to rhythm, lengthening the circled syllables and reducing others. After practicing, they record themselves reading their transcript with excellent sentence stress, and then they write a reflection on their corrections and their rerecording.

Some transcript assignments are more open-ended. For example, students might be asked to correct the grammar of their recorded speech, and then choose one grammatical correction that they would like to focus on for the next several weeks. Then, they are asked to listen for this grammar point in the language around them and in their own speech. They must also write down examples that they hear, mistakes that they notice, corrections they receive, and their own thoughts in a lengthy reflection.

This practice has a variety of advantages for students. When they choose their own mistakes to focus on, they are likely to choose relevant, salient, and learnable points for themselves. The instructor work involved is not very extensive with the balance of effort shifted to the students. And it gets results! A nine-week term is a very short time, but I have seen clear examples of increased awareness and self-monitoring leading to improvements in spoken accuracy.

Student self-correction and awareness building can't replace formal instruction about language elements, and neither can it replace more extended, purely meaning-based communicative practice. However, it builds an essential bridge between the two, and I would include such a strand in any intensive language class I teach in the future.

Additional Reading

These articles present a variety of related approaches to helping learners notice features of their own speech through recordings and transcription tasks.

- Basturkmen, H. (2002). Learner observation, and reflection on, spoken discourse: An approach for teaching academic speaking. *TESOL Journal*, 11(2), 26-30.
- Huang, S. (2008). Raising learner-initiated attention to formal aspects of their oral production through transcription and stimulated reflection. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 46, 375-392.

- Lynch, T. (2001) Seeing what they meant: Transcribing as a route to noticing. *ELT Journal*, 55(2), 124-132.
- Lynch, T. (2007). Learning from the transcripts of an oral communication task. *ELT Journal*, 61(4), 311-320.
- Lynch, T. & Maclean, J. (2000). Exploring the benefits of task repetition and recycling for classroom language learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 4, 221-250.
- Mennim, P. (2003). Rehearsed oral output and reactive focus on form. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 130-138.
- Stillwell, C., Curabba, B., Alexander, K., Kidd, A., Kim, E., Stone, P. & Wyle, C. (2009). Students transcribing tasks: Noticing fluency, accuracy, and complexity. *ELT Journal*, 64(4), 445-455.

Beth Sheppard is an ESL instructor at the University of Oregon.

Helping Students Through Difficult Conversations

Maiko Hata, University of Oregon

Have you had students come to you crying, yelling, or completely depressed? As ESL teachers, we are often engaged in difficult conversations with our students. After making my transition from teacher to academic advisor, learning to navigate challenging conversations with international students has been demanding yet fascinating. Here are some techniques I have found helpful.

1. A smile and a friendly “How are you?” go a long way.

No matter what culture students might be from, this is always appreciated: After all, a smile is universal. I find this especially helpful when the student is being referred to us for “problematic” behaviors like excessive absences or cheating. The welcoming atmosphere usually diffuses such students’ “combat-ready” mentality: sometimes,