


ACADEMICALLY SPEAKING: NEW IDENTITIES OR OLD REALITIES?

Alex Barthel

University of Technology, Sydney

alex.barthel@uts.edu.au

Many students who come from language backgrounds other than English have considerable difficulties in speaking English. Difficulties exist at the discourse, the interactive, the morpho-syntactic as well as at the suprasegmental and paralinguistic levels. This paper examines some of problems in spoken English faced by university students . Particular emphasis is placed on the problems faced by students from differing cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The paper gives a brief analysis of the causes of the main pronunciation problems of South East Asian students. Students of South East Asian backgrounds, speak languages (Cantonese, Vietnamese, etc.) which are based on suprasegmental and paralinguistic codes considerably different from English. This results in them having more serious pronunciation problems than students who speak languages, closer to English at the suprasegmental level (Danish, Dutch, German, etc.). A range of academic contexts, formal and informal, where spoken language is the main communication channel is examined: these include seminar presentations, tutorial participation, casual conversation and 'administrative negotiations'. The role of formal tuition in spoken communication (at discourse, suprasegmental and segmental



level) and several options to integrate the development of spoken discourse skills into courses is also discussed.

Introduction


Academics working in the areas of academic support, education and applied linguistics are focusing increasingly on the features of academic discourse and the measurement of students' literacy skills (Webb and Bonanno, 1993). The debate about how generalisable generic skills are and how academic literacy is specific to different purposes and contexts is gaining more attention from academics.

At the same time, the industry and employers are becoming increasingly alarmed about graduates' lack of written and oral communication skills. In 1993, the National Board of Employment, Education and Training commissioned a study of skills required of graduates as part of its examination of the quality of Higher Education in Australia.

The survey found that employers use academic results as the initial basis for selection, but after that they select graduates on the basis of their communication skills (...). These skills were perceived to be generally lacking in new graduates (...). The report emphasises the importance of communication skills for industry, based on findings of other studies and concludes by suggesting that the equipping of graduates with communication and social skills perceived to be deficient will assist graduates' transition to the work environment (Stockwell & Associates, 1993).

Increasing efforts are being made to improve students written communication skills. Australian universities provide assistance to students and, in many cases to staff, through academic support units. Yet, one of the areas which has still not received the attention it deserves is oral communication skills.

There are at least two other reasons for taking the spoken language seriously. One is that its is now coming back into



its own as a bearer of cultural value. (...) The other reason, and no less important is (...) that we learn by listening and speaking, as well as by reading and writing. Learning is essentially a process of constructing meanings; and the cognitive component in learning is a process of constructing linguistic meanings - semantic systems and semantic structures. (Halliday, 1985)


This paper will attempt to place spoken discourse and the development of students' oral skills on the agenda of universities. It will make a claim about the specific role of spoken communication in tertiary education and will suggest several options to incorporate the development of oral communication skills into courses.

The place of academic oracy in comparison to academic literacy

Speech and writing are in practice used in different contexts, for different purposes - though obviously with a certain amount of overlap. This is partly a ritual matter, a form of social convention (...). (...) speech and writing impose different grids on experience. There is a sense in which they create different realities. (Halliday, 1985)

Australian universities are not places where oral discourse is favoured. Knowledge is transferred through the written word. Lectures are by and large based on written texts. The purpose of most tutorials is to provide support to and clarification of written texts and or lectures. Most assessments are written: essays, reports, theses, examinations. When oral assessments (formal seminar presentations, interviews, etc.) are part of assessment schemes, their weighting is usually much lower than written components.

Preliminary research into the assessment, definitions and development of oral competence is scarce and does not get the same degree of acknowledgment or resourcing as research in the areas of written communication. A project to diagnose the oral and written communication skills of Pharmacy students at Sydney University (Jones, 1993) was not funded.



Books about studying at universities and communication skills mention oral skills, but emphasise academic literacy skills. At conferences aimed at academic support staff only a small number of presentations deal with spoken academic discourse.

Academic support units focus mainly on developing students' written skills despite the increasing number of students of non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), both full fee paying overseas students and permanent residents, who have considerable difficulties in communicating orally in English. Their difficulties are exacerbated by cross-cultural communication factors which vary considerably from one culture to another. The 'in-house' culture of an Australian university is an additional factor which heightens the complexity of oral discourse(s).

Contexts and features of academic oracy


Contexts

The contexts where spoken discourse is used at universities could be categorised into three broad areas of formal, semi-formal and informal contexts.

The most common formal situations where spoken discourse are used is in formal/assessable seminar presentations, formal/assessable interviews and role-plays (Jones, 1994), oral exams and committees (Faculty Boards, etc.) and lectures.

Tutorials and discussion groups are the most common contexts where semi-formal spoken discourse is used. Semi-formal situations also include contexts where students discuss their studies and assignments with academic staff, for example to seek clarifications about work requirements or to explain or justify the validity or value of points or arguments not accepted by a lecturer. An important element here is the students' ability to transcode from the written to the spoken discourse (eg. orally paraphrasing and rewording an inappropriately constructed or worded argument in a written essay).

Further situations which should be included in the category of semi-formal oral discourse are most of the administrative and organisational contexts, where students need good oral negotiation skills, in particular at the time of enrolment, changing




subjects, making arrangements to change assignment deadlines, convincing counsellors that they need support (financial, personal) or simply making appointments (directly, or indirectly through administrative staff) to see academic staff.

At the informal level, most situations of socialising (student-student and student-staff) would be included. While the features of, say casual conversation, may not differ enormously from a university context to other contexts involving people of similar socio-economic and educational backgrounds, the role of informal contexts at universities should not be underestimated. It is a well documented fact (Gumperz, 1982, Stubbs, 1983) that informal discourse is frequently a prerequisite as well as an adjunct feature of semi-formal and formal situations (small talk on the way to a meeting, brief chit chat before and during a meeting with a supervisor, etc.). Features of, and interactional strategies specific to casual conversation have been documented and are frequently incorporated into courses of English as a second language (Slade and Norris, 1986, Zawadzki, 1994)

Features

In addition to characteristics specific to spoken discourse, one of the main features of spoken discourse is the fact that, irrespective of its context (formal, semi-formal, informal), spoken discourse is interactive and that this interaction is its integral dynamic.

Overall, spoken discourse, has specific characteristics which differentiate it from written discourse. It can be described as a system of interrelated codes at the paralinguistic level (gestures, facial expressions, proxemics, eye contact, posture, physical contact, appearance, etc.), at the suprasegmental level (expressing attitudinal meaning through pitch, pause, silence, speed, intonation, rhythm, stress patterns, etc.), at the segmental level (reduction of unstressed vowels, modification of sounds at word boundaries through assimilation or liaison, articulation of sounds in isolate word forms, etc.), at the syntactic level (complex, incomplete sentences, etc.) and at the lexico-semantic level (limited lexical density, repetition, redundancy, use of idiomatic expressions, etc.).




Factors such as gender and age, as well as socio-economic, educational, geographic (eg. Irish, American, Australian accents) affect these characteristics considerably. Users of spoken discourse must be sufficiently familiar with the characteristics of the codes specific to different contexts, both as decoders (listeners) and encoders (speakers) to communicate effectively.

The main skill used by learners in decoding meaning in spoken discourse relies on their ability to identify the main points or important information through recognising features specific to spoken discourse such as vocal underlying (eg. decreased speed, increased volume), end-focus, end-weight, verbal cues (eg. 'the point I want to make ...'), topic sentences. Listeners rely on similar features to distinguish main ideas from supporting details and to reduce spoken texts through rejecting redundant or irrelevant information (noise) by recognising digressions, false starts, etc.

One of the major problems encountered by students at this level is their lack of both the decoding (listening) skills and their limited familiarity with the complexity of the spoken codes used in university contexts. Spoken and written codes vary considerably from one area of study to another. This is what makes their description and categorisation difficult.

If a spoken text has been inappropriately decoded or decoded according to a different (culturally, linguistically, contextually) system of codes, the ensuing encoding (speaking) is also likely to be inappropriate or inaccurate. This can result in misunderstandings, communication breakdowns and frustrations.

One of the major difficulties faced by NESB students is to decode a wide range of English codes. This is particularly true for students who come from language and cultural backgrounds which use codes different from English codes which interfere with their decoding process. For example, intonation, rhythm and stress as they are used in English are not used in any similar way in languages such as Cantonese or Vietnamese which are mono-syllabic (each word is one syllable long) tone languages (up to 6 different tones can be applied to each syllable, thus changing the meaning of words).



Furthermore the difficulties of NESB students is exacerbated by cultural factors affecting their decoding (and encoding) skills: the different levels of significance of paralinguistic codes (eye contact, gestures, proxemics, etc.) within Western and non-Western cultures and between these cultures.

In addition to the decoding and encoding skills required by speakers, they also need to be familiar with the interactive strategies used in spoken discourse which include:


- initiating (opening) which involves starting the discourse, introducing a topic by using verbal, vocal and non-verbal cues,
- maintaining (developing) the discourse by responding (acknowledging, replying, giving feed-back), asking for reformulation/clarification, extending discourse (exemplifying, adding points), shifting the topic, marking time (stalling), turn-taking (interrupting, challenging), 'repairing' in discourse, etc. and
- terminating (closing) the discourse by marking the boundaries, coming out of the discourse and concluding a topic by using appropriate micro-functions such as substantiating and verbal cues for summing up, etc.

These strategies, like the characteristics of spoken discourse are affected by cultural, contextual, socio-economic and educational factors.

One of the most complex tasks, specific to the university context, which students have to complete throughout their studies, is the continuous transfer from written to spoken discourse and vice versa.

This happens in the contexts of note-taking in lectures and using these notes to write assignments. But the most common occurrence is the transcoding from written work (assignments, exams) to spoken forms, in particular in situations where students need to explain or justify what they have written, to academic staff.

The process of transferring information from written to oral discourse, involves transcoding features of written discourse (at a structural, content and conceptual level). It also means that there is a degree of recoding involved in expressing and understanding equivalence of meaning within similar styles (eg. paraphrasing to



avoid repetition), across different styles (eg. from technical to lay) or shifting from the formal to the informal (eg. explaining something colloquially) as in tutorials, where frequently, highly abstract theoretical concepts are discussed in colloquial spoken discourse.

The transcoding process also applies to information presented in visual, non-verbal codes. This involves the straight conversion of diagrams, tables, graphs, visuals into speech, but also the interpretation or comparison of these non-verbal codes in speech.

Lectures are a fairly unique form of spoken discourse as their characteristics are different from those of spoken discourse in at least two major aspects: lectures are based on written 'scripts' (linearity, lexical density, syntax of written texts, etc.) and they are non interactive.

This means that in the context of a lecture, students are not able to use most of the interactive strategies specific to spoken discourse (asking for clarification, giving feedback to indicate lack of understanding, etc.). They have to use strategies similar to those they would use when facing a written text and they have to be able to understand:

- not explicitly stated spoken information through making inferences,
- the communicative value of spoken discourse without explicit indicators (eg an interrogative that is a polite command, a statement that is in fact a suggestion, etc.),
- relations within sentences, especially complex embedding,
- relations between part of oral discourse through lexical cohesion devices of repetition, synonymy, etc.,
- relations between part of a text through grammatical cohesion devices, etc.



Options

There is a place for generic type workshops to address say, pronunciation problems of students from specific language backgrounds. Over the past 10 years for example, the English Language and Study Skills Assistance (ELSSA) Centre, at the University of Technology, Sydney, has offered pronunciation workshop which focus more on the suprasegmental (rhythm, intonation, stress, etc.) than on the segmental (vowels, consonants, etc.) features of English. Attendance rates of approximately 90% and students' (most of them of East and South-East Asian background) increased intelligibility are indicators that there is a place for this type of workshops.

The role and importance of academic oracy needs to be recognised more generally and become an integral part of the curriculum. Oral problem solving tasks could be incorporated into first year subjects, in particular tasks which require two speakers to get information from each other through a process of negotiating meaning, seeking clarification, etc.. These tasks would develop participants' interactional skills in non-threatening contexts. For example, one student has to complete a flow chart by asking another students who has a completed flow chart for details (Lynch and Anderson, 1992).

This could be extended and more confronting situations could be developed where the participants have or are given roles or opinions which will require them to negotiate meaning under pressure and use spoken language in situations which reflect more unpredictable situations than in more linear clarification seeking problem solving activities than the one described above. Role plays reflecting the reality of work contexts could be incorporated into the curriculum and the weighting of oral assessment tasks could replace written assessment, where relevant.

A third type of activity which would focus on the more formal aspects of spoken discourse, and which is already an integral component of many university courses is based on seminar presentations, interviews and, to a lesser degree, tutorial participation. For example, at the University of Technology, Sydney, courses are offered for credit by the ELSSA Centre where the assessment is almost exclusively based on students' performance in spoken English.



Conclusion

There are clearly sufficient reasons why academic oracy should not only be the focus of further research, but should also be addressed in its own right by academic support units and by faculties more generally.

The whole area of academic oracy needs to be researched. Before more accurate assessment criteria of spoken discourse are developed, we need to look more closely at academic spoken texts and professional oral communication in their own right and their roles as social and professional practices. Investigations of discoursal strategies similar to those conducted in the context of white-collar professional multicultural workplaces (Willing, 1992) or research specific to the oral communication needs of graduates in a specific profession (Jones, 1993, 1994) need to be developed.

Academic support units provide substantial support to students in the area of academic literacy. Workshops specifically aimed at developing students' academic oracy skills could be developed.


In addition to generic courses, faculty specific speaking workshops should be provided by academic support units to develop students spoken discourse skills within the contexts of their course of study.

References

Bailey, K.M. & L. Savage (eds), 1994, *New Ways in Teaching Speaking*, TESOL Publications, Alexandria, Virginia.

Ballard, B and Clanchy, J, 1988, *'Studying in Australia'*, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne

Barthel, A, 1993, 'Language support and cultural issues', *Research and development in higher education*, volume 16, HERDSA, Sydney



Barthel, A (ed.), 1993, 'Cultural diversity and higher education: has it made a difference? should it make a difference?', conference proceedings, University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney

Brazil, D, Coulthard, M and Johns, C, 1980, 'Discourse, intonation and language teaching', Longman, London

Brown, G and Yule, G, 1983, 'Teaching the spoken language: an approach based on the analysis of conversational English', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Brown, P and Levinson, SC, 1987, 'Politeness: some universals in language usage', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Chanock, K (ed.), 1994, 'Integrating the teaching of academic discourse into courses in the disciplines', conference proceedings, Language and academic skills units, La Trobe University, Bundoora

Cruttenden, A, 1986, Intonation, CUP, Cambridge

Dalton, C. & Seidlhofer, B. 1994, Pronunciation, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Gumperz, JJ, 1982, 'Discourse strategies' Cambridge University Press, Cambridge


Gumperz, JJ (ed.), 1982, 'Language and social identity', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Halliday, M.A.K. 1970, A Course in Spoken English: Intonation, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Halliday, M.A.K., 1985, 'Spoken and written language', Deakin University Press, Deakin

Hirst, D. & Di Cristo, A (eds.), 1998, Intonation systems: a survey of twenty languages, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Jones, J, 1993, 'Developing and assessing oral competence in the higher education curriculum', Research and development in higher education, volume 16, HERDSA, Sydney



Jones, J, 1994, 'Preparing for the profession: an analysis of student role-plays of pharmacy service encounters', paper presented at the 6th International Systemic Functional Workshop, Antwerp, Belgium

Lynch, T and Anderson, K, 1992, 'Study speaking', Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Morley, J. (ed) 1994, Pronunciation Pedagogy and Theory, New Views, New Directions, TESOL , Alexandria, Virginia.

Pegolo, C, 1993, 'Fluency and intelligibility in speech production: making the theories talk', Prospect, 8/3, NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney

Renard, R, 1975, 'Introduction to the verbo-tonal method of phonetic correction', Didier, Paris

Slade, D and Norris, L, 1986, 'Teaching casual conversation: topics, strategies and interactional skills', NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney

Stockwell & Associates, 1993, 'Skills required for graduates: one test of quality in Australian Higher Education', AGPS, Canberra

Stubbs, M, 1983, 'Discourse analysis: the sociolinguistic analysis of natural language', Basil Blackwell, Oxford

Tench, P. 1996, The Intonation Systems of English, Cassell, London.

Underhill, A. 1994, Sound Foundations, Heinemann, Oxford.

Vanderplank, R, 1993, 'Pacing and spacing as predictors of difficulty in speaking and understanding English', ELT journal, 47/2, Oxford University Press, Oxford

Willing, K, 1992, 'Talking it through: clarification and problem -solving in professional work', NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney

Zawadzki, H, 1994, 'In tempo: an English pronunciation course', NCELTR Macquarie University, Sydney