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On How Thinking Shapes Speaking: Techniques to Enhance Students' Oral Discourse

The institution where we work in Buenos Aires—*Asociación Ex Alumnos del Profesorado en Lenguas Vivas "Juan Ramón Fernández"* (AEXALEVI)—is devoted to the teaching of foreign languages, particularly English, and it administers examinations all over Argentina. One central problem we have identified in our work in the AEXALEVI Teachers' Centre is the compartmentalization of instruction and assessment.

For five years we held virtual and face-to-face forums with instructors from Buenos Aires and other districts, and most of these teachers reported that they generally teach the content of the syllabus as one thing, and they deal with exam training as a separate component in the course design, developed close to examination time and not before. However, when the teacher indulges in teaching to the test, the student does not have the chance to develop skills over time. For example, we have observed students who can rattle off the summary of a story, overtly learned by heart, without ever being able to answer a simple question from the examiner or interact with a peer in a communicative task. Were the students trained to recite the story? Surely they were. Were the students given opportunities to develop oral skills throughout the course so that they would be able to engage in realistic talk? We do not think so. Here lies the danger of treating course and exam, and by the same token, teaching/learning and evaluation, as two separate components rather than as an integrated whole.

At the Teachers' Centre, we felt we needed to take a step forward to design ways to introduce changes in skill development to help students both improve their speaking ability and perform better on tests. The experience we are going to describe was born out of a concern to accomplish these goals. This article describes several techniques that allow students to structure their oral discourse in meaningful ways, which we hope will be useful for other teachers in similar contexts.

STRATEGIES TO STRUCTURE ORAL DISCOURSE

When we teach our students how to write a composition in a foreign language, we teach them how to structure their writing. To this end, we provide pictures, guiding questions, key words, sentence starters, and model paragraphs to help them feel at ease with the difficult task ahead. However, when it comes to dealing with speaking in a foreign language—in this case, English—we may not be totally aware that oral discourse requires

structuring as well. The more our students speak English in class, the more chances they have to improve their performance in English, and as a result, they are expected to perform better in oral exams. However, all learners are different, and some may need more than just opportunities for speaking in English. In our experience, some students benefit from learning strategies on how to structure oral discourse. We have observed that certain techniques help these students to gain confidence and get started in oral performance, basically because the techniques, as we will show, prevent the students from purposeless wandering when they have to give certain answers in oral interaction.

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Brown (2001) highlights the importance of developing strategic competence, one of the components of the communicative competence model supporting successful oral communication (Canale and Swain 1980; Bachman 1990). Our efforts in the classroom are based on helping students think and act strategically—skills that will surely make them become more efficient communicators in English.

THINKING AND ROUTINES

A large amount of research has been done in the area of learning strategies and their training; this research shows that strategy training must be explicit and contextualized in situations in which the students can appreciate the value of the strategy and that development of strategies occurs over time as they are modeled, applied, and evaluated by teachers and students (Hsiao and Oxford 2002; Cohen 2000; O'Malley and Chamot 1990; Oxford 1990; Wenden 1991).

As teachers, we had always provided our students with *language banks* (e.g., vocabulary relevant for the task, linkers, suitable openings and endings, useful expressions), which we worked on systematically throughout the course. However, this time we were seeking something different, something that could help students structure their oral discourse. It was then that we did research into how thinking shapes speaking by analyzing and applying the work of Ritchhart (2002) on thinking routines.

All teachers are familiar with routines, those actions that we do in class with the purpose of organizing classroom life: hands up before a speaking turn is assigned, an agenda written on the board at the beginning of each class, silent reading time on Friday afternoons. Ritchhart says that "classroom routines tend to be explicit and goal-driven in nature" and that "their adoption usually represents a deliberate choice on the part of the teacher" (2002, 86). Yet not all classroom routines are alike. Some routines help to organize students' behavior, whereas others help to support thinking. Ritchhart calls the latter "thinking routines" and defines them as those routines that "direct and guide mental action" (2002, 89). Of the many routines that we may have in the classroom, thinking routines explicitly support mental processing by fostering it. An example is starting a fresh unit with a brainstorming task in which prior knowledge is recorded in a web. Brainstorming and webbing are thinking routines in that they "facilitate students' making connections, generating new ideas and possibilities, and activating prior knowledge" (Ritchhart 2002, 90).

Thinking routines have certain features such as the fact that "they consist of few steps, are easy to teach and learn, are easily supported, and get used repeatedly" (Ritchhart 2002, 90). They can be singled out easily because they are named in a certain way—for example, "brainstorming, webbing, pro and con lists, Know–Want to know–Learned (KWL)" (Ritchhart 2002, 90). Apart from fostering thinking, these routines serve major purposes. Thus, a list of pros and cons may turn out to be a good way of choosing between options before we make a decision, and a KWL chart

may help us record what we know about a topic, what we wish to learn about it, and finally, after the topic has been explored, what we have learned in relation to it. According to Ritchhart, "thinking routines are more instrumental than are other routines" (2002, 90). Of the examples that he provides, we selected two to begin our work, and then we developed three of our own.

AN EXAMINATION OF TWO TECHNIQUES

In the descriptions below we have labeled the selected routines as techniques, relying on Brown's (2001) principles for speaking activities. Brown suggests using "techniques that cover the spectrum of learner needs from language-based focus on accuracy to message-based focus on interaction, meaning and fluency" (2001, 275). We consider that the techniques in this article fall somewhere along this continuum in that they provide support for students to engage in various classroom tasks. In addition, Brown offers useful designations that techniques must be "intrinsically motivating" and that teachers should help students "to see how the activity will benefit them" (2001, 275).

Technique 1: Say what. Say why. Say other things to try

The first technique was *Say what. Say why. Say other things to try*, which was suggested to Ritchhart (2002) by a colleague. It sounds straightforward and catchy, with a rhythm that Ritchhart highlights as essential for students to remember. We decided that this technique could help our students frame their answers to personal questions, a common real-life situation. In many exam situations students are generally required to answer questions of this sort as well.

We filmed three adult students whose skills were at the Common European Framework level A2 for spoken interaction (Council of Europe 2001). We told them to imagine that they were getting ready for a job interview. All of them produced disorganized replies and made plenty of errors. It was as if the students were randomly trying to sort information in order to give an answer. For example, to the question "What do you do on weekends?" one student answered, "I usually went to my house, to clean my house, I usually go with my dog to the park and sometimes I go by bicycle and then I like to learn to read another things not in relation to my profession." We did not make any corrections; we just allowed each student to speak freely, each of them in his or her assigned turn. Our next step was to ask these students how they felt about their answers. They agreed that they were not happy with their performance and felt they did not have the words to answer the question. We suspected that one problem might have been that they did not know how to organize their answers, so we went ahead with the technique.

We explained to them that we were going to teach them a trick to help them answer the question. As we went along, we jotted down the steps of the technique on the board: For the question "What do you do on weekends?" first say what you do—for example, "I go jogging" or "I read a lot." (We elicited from the students the actions they did.) Next say why you do that—for example, "I go jogging because I love exercise" or "I read a lot because I have a lot of books and little time on weekdays." (We elicited answers from them, encouraging them to link this new idea with their previous answers, thus producing a short stretch of speech.) Finally, add more information: Say other things to try. For example, "I go jogging because I love exercise. I always go alone because my friends don't like to exercise much." Or, "I read a lot because I have a lot of books and little time on weekdays. Right now I am about to finish a novel. It's very exciting." (Here again, we elicited possible answers from the students as we helped them produce a longer piece of discourse.)

The students found the technique enjoyable, noting that it was a rhyme and easy to recall. We passed on to the second part of the procedure, which was filming the students as they answered the same question with the aid of the technique. During the task, they looked

at the steps of the technique on the board. Following is the production of the student whose first answer we transcribed above, as she applied the technique:

> *Say what:* "I always go to the park with my dog."
>
> *Say why:* "Because my dog loves running."
>
> *Say other things to try:* "And we stay there at six p.m."

Despite some grammatical inaccuracy, the student significantly improved the organization of her answer. We observed the same improvement in the discourse of the other two students in the rehearsal situation. It is worth mentioning that we were just experimenting with the technique, and yet it rendered benefits.

We were curious, of course, to see how the technique would work when we introduced it to a larger group of students as part of a communicative task. After a whole-class talk on stress and modern life, we asked the students to work in pairs and ask each other about their activities and habits in order to find out how stressful their lives were in comparison with their partner's. After the student pairs reported to the whole class, we said that we were going to ask them a question to check the findings, as people may have different perceptions of what it means to lead a stressful life. We asked some students randomly, "How much free time do you have?" As we expected, some answers were a bit disorganized.

We announced that we were going to show them how to organize their ideas to optimize their answers. We explained the technique and then asked students to do the task again. Afterwards, we asked the students to say what they thought of the technique, and they agreed that it had been useful. We produced a poster with the steps to display on the classroom board as reference. We pointed out that in future lessons we were going to apply the technique to any personal question that was asked in class. Two examples of subsequent questions and answers follow:

1. *Question:* "How often do you go to the cinema?"

   Say what: "I go to the cinema once a month."

   Say why: "Because the ticket is quite expensive for me."

   Say other things to try: "I really love science fiction films."

2. *Question:* "What did you do last weekend?"

   Say what: "I went to my grandmother's house."

   Say why: "Because I missed her."

   Say other things to try: "We played cards and we had fun."

We suggested that the students could document the steps of the technique in their cell phones or tablets in case they wished to refer to them outside the classroom.

Technique 2: Claim, support, question

The second technique was *Claim, Support, Question* (CSQ) (Ritchhart 2002, 91), which means that the students first have to say something or make a point, then provide evidence or a reason for the point, and finally pass the speaking turn to their partners by asking a question. At work, people engage in meetings and videoconferences where they interact and exchange opinions as they keep the conversation going towards a goal. In everyday life, we interact with others to choose a present for a friend, to decide what to do on the weekend, or to plan where to go on an upcoming holiday. We thought that this technique would work for discussion tasks in which students have to interact with each other to make a decision or solve a problem.

We repeated the procedure described for Technique 1 above by filming the students doing a discussion task both before and after providing them with the technique. The task consisted

of viewing several birthday gift options and deciding which one to buy for a friend. Here is an extract of what a student pair said:

Student A

Claim: "It's Ale's birthday this week. We could buy a present for him. He likes reading books."

Support: "Yesterday I saw a best seller."

Question: "What about buying it for him?"

Student B

Claim: "I don't know. Best sellers are expensive."

Support: "Perhaps a CD will be cheaper."

Question: "What do you think?"

The interaction went on like this until the students reached a decision. We found that the technique helped the students understand that for interactive communication, they need to pass the turn to their interlocutor. Discussion tasks are not monologues by one student who monopolizes the conversation and leaves little time for the other person to talk, nor are they tasks to be completed by each student individually with no interaction.

When we introduced the technique to a group of students in the classroom, we first modeled the interaction with the aid of a ball. As we carried out the task, we used the ball to signal each step: Claim (bounce), Support (bounce), Question (throw the ball to your partner). Movement associated with talking probably helps to fix the technique in memory besides adding more fun to the task. After modeling and with the technique written on the board, we gave student pairs a small ball and began the discussion task. We noticed that some students did not bounce their balls, nor did they throw them to their partners. We decided not to interrupt the task at that point, but when it was the time for the report, we asked the students why they thought we had given each pair a ball. Some students agreed that the ball had helped them remember the steps, and others admitted having forgotten to use the ball at all. We challenged them with further discussion tasks, and this time they all paid attention to the bouncing and throwing. Using a task sheet on which several pictures showed options for topics, student pairs chose to discuss how to spend a weekend away together (at the beach, in a skiing resort, at a camping site, and so on). They produced a dialogue similar to the following:

Student A: "In my opinion, we should go to the beach because we'll have a lot of fun. What do you think?"

Student B: "I feel that going camping is the best choice because we'll share many activities and long conversations. How do you feel about that?"

We have always been concerned with how to help our students produce longer pieces of discourse.

The conversation continued until most of the topics were discussed and students came to a decision. Here again, the results were satisfactory in that the students were able to produce organized interaction.

THREE TECHNIQUES WE DEVELOPED

In English as a foreign language learning contexts, because English is not spoken out in the community, students generally find it very difficult to sustain conversations. We have always been concerned with how to help our students produce longer pieces of discourse and had grown enthusiastic about the results and inspired by the techniques described by Ritchhart (2002). We therefore set out to develop the following three techniques.

WWW

We first sought to develop a technique that would prove useful for extended speaking

tasks, in which students discuss a topic for about a minute. We thought of *WWW*, an obvious reference to the World Wide Web, as a mnemonic device for *What you think, what you like, what you do, and other people too*. The idea behind it is that a student first gives an opinion on the topic, then says what he or she likes and does in relation to it, and finally extends it to other people. Our technique looked complex, but it was meant to address a complex task that requires students to produce a stretch of sustained discourse.

We knew that in spite of the steps involved in the technique, it would not provide us with a complete solution to our concern about sustained discourse; however, the technique would provide one way to get started and would help students gain confidence as they realized the ability to produce a relatively short piece of discourse, and it would lead to further development of sustained speech over time.

We again tried the before-and-after format and asked one student to talk about healthy breakfast habits. This is what he said before we demonstrated the technique:

> "I have for breakfast coffee with milk and cookies in the morning. That doctors say it's very important. My children eat cereals. Sometimes I don't have many time and I only have a fruit."

Here again, we did not correct mistakes. After the demonstration of the technique, he managed to structure his discourse more effectively:

> *What you think:* "I think that breakfast is very important."
>
> *What you like:* "I like having coffee with milk and cookies."
>
> *What you do:* "Sometimes I don't have breakfast because I haven't many time and I only eat a fruit."
>
> *And other people too:* "My children eat healthy food like milk and cereals or yoghurt."

We considered his answer quite satisfactory, although perhaps with further oral development we would insist on the production of a more complete piece of discourse. Still, our technique seemed to have worked. The second time that the student attempted to talk about the topic, his discourse was better organized.

In the rehearsal stage we explained the technique and wrote each part of it on the board as we elicited possible answers from the students. As this was a rather long technique, involving four steps instead of three, we found ourselves naturally gesturing as we said it. We pointed to our heads as we said, *What you think*; held our thumbs up for *What you like*; made a fast movement of our arms as if we were jogging for *What you do*; and made an outward movement of our hands for *And other people too*. In short, we acted out the technique, and we encouraged the students to do the same.

When we applied the technique in class, we demonstrated it as part of a game. With the students sitting in a circle, we announced that we were going to play an opinion game. We made slips of paper with topics written on them (e.g., video games, holidays with friends, living abroad). One student picked a slip and read the topic aloud. We explained that the rule of the game was that they had to give an opinion related to the topic by following four steps. We said and gestured the steps of the technique, then wrote them on the board. We demonstrated with one of the topics by eliciting possible answers from the students. Then we assigned turns clockwise in the circle and played the game. Students lost points by failing to follow all four steps or forgetting them. There were actually many points lost, but, most important of all, the students had fun checking that their classmates were actually applying all four steps in their opinions. The winner was the one with the highest score after the completion of several topics.

We found that the game helped the students remember the steps of the technique, just

as the bouncing ball had. We also found that the easiest way to incorporate the technique into daily classwork was to use it every time a new topic was introduced, particularly at the beginning of a unit. We used the technique with the topics of sports, free-time activities, keeping in touch with friends, and shopping habits, among others.

Who, where, what, and why, you can have a try!

In many courses, students do extensive reading of stories, and they may be required to talk about the stories in oral examinations. With children, this task is usually supported by pictures. Helping a ten-year-old student structure a description is undoubtedly a challenge, so we came up with a technique where pictures provide the main input for the students to talk about; we call it *picture-bound* to differentiate it from other techniques in which the pictures act as support. In other words, the technique is grounded on the situations in the pictures. Unlike in the rehearsal situation with the adult learners, we were unable to film the children due to legal matters (filming children requires their parents' formal consent).

The first picture-bound technique that we used was for descriptions. Let us take as an example a picture in any story that we may use with our students. Generally, pictures show one or several characters doing an action in a certain setting and at a certain time. This is the reason why the technique begins with *Who*, for "Who is in the picture?" Then comes *Where*, for "Where is the character?" Next is *What*, for "What is the character doing?" And finally there is *Why*, for "Why is the character doing that action?" We think that these four questions are enough for picture description, at least for the part that the students will attempt to produce on their own.

In a course for children, our students read a story about an American girl who makes a new friend while she is traveling with her parents in China. In one of the pictures, we see the scene of the girl catching the first glimpse of her friend-to-be in a crowd.

To introduce the technique, we offered an analogy. We told the students to imagine that they had a camera and that they were shooting the scene in the picture. We were the directors, so we were going to give them the instructions of what to film. We asked them to put their hands before their eyes as if they were holding a camera and then to look through the opening between their fingers as if it were the lens. They first had to make a close-up of who was in the scene and to say who they saw through the lens: "I can see an American girl and a Chinese girl in a crowd." Next, they had to step back a bit so that their cameras would show the whole place and to say what they saw through the lens: "It's a busy street in China." Now back to the girls—the students had to show what was happening and what they were doing: "The American girl is looking at the Chinese girl." Finally, their cameras had to linger on the scene for a few seconds so that they would say why the girl was doing that: "Because she wants to have a friend."

The filming analogy proved to be useful and enjoyable for the children. When we moved on to describe other pictures in the story, they remembered the steps little by little, and we were able to withdraw the director's orders. As a follow-up task, we asked the students to write down their descriptions and to add further information about the story. The outcome was a short composition.

Now and next, I will pass this test!

Another picture-bound technique we developed is *Now and next, I will pass this test!* This is a simple technique that seeks to encourage initial steps in a narrative by referring to two actions in chronological order. We tend to think of narrative as a sequence of actions sometime in the past. But of course, the narrative could as well be a sequence in the present, especially when the students have not learned the past tense yet. In this technique, however, our idea is to link a present event to a future event, thus producing a brief narrative sequence that helps the children see the cause-effect

relationship of two actions, one that happens in the present moment and another one that will happen soon in the story but to which the students refer in the present.

In the case of the story that we referred to above, a possible sequence would be: "The American girl looks at the Chinese girl. Next she says 'hi' to her in Chinese." The students do not need to produce "Next she is going to say 'hi' to her in Chinese." On the one hand, the children may not have learned how to refer to the future yet. On the other hand, it does not really matter because we are interested in the students' awareness of how to connect two events chronologically to produce a short piece of discourse, to extend beyond the sentence and to begin to tell the story.

Once the students had practiced the *Who, where, what, and why* technique with several pictures in the story, we introduced the *Now and next* technique by enlarging the filming analogy. We told them that they were going to use their cameras to see beyond the picture into the story; we then modeled the narrative sequence and guided the students to voice other narrative sequences in the same story.

As a follow-up task, we played a memory game. We had slips of paper that detailed events in the story, and the students had to find matching pairs for *Now and next*, *I will pass this test!* The game allowed the children to become familiar with the events in the story and helped to keep raising their awareness of how to construct a chronological sequence. The matching pairs were posted with the corresponding pictures in the story for the students to have a clearer idea of actions and story development. For those matching pairs that had no corresponding pictures, we asked the children to draw the scenes. We assigned different matching pairs to different children working in twos. The overall result was a much longer sequence of pictures, which included the students' own drawings, each with their corresponding two-action narrative. The students were able to actually see most of the story in this summary-like chronology, which definitely helped them to remember the plot.

RESULTS

The positive results we received after implementing the techniques in this article give us hope that other teachers will also find them beneficial. We gathered qualitative feedback and found that it correlated with our observations of student performance. Most of our students have been able to realize improvement in their oral performance. Some of them began by consciously using the techniques, and, sometime later, they forgot about using the technique altogether and seemed to gain enough confidence to depart from the deliberate scaffolding routines and conduct interactions more independently.

We have also received feedback from the teachers who applied the techniques in their lessons in a sustained manner. Apart from implementing the techniques ourselves, we taught them to about 30 teachers who attended sessions in our face-to-face forum at AEXALEVI. Many of these teachers reported having tried out the techniques in their lessons. Some teachers taught the techniques to different target groups of learners; that is, they did not teach the same students more than two techniques simultaneously. Other teachers carried out systematic work on the techniques, which were used to answer questions in class as part of larger speaking tasks or to perform the more specific task for which the techniques had been created. In both cases, teachers found that the students produced more organized oral discourse

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and seemed more confident when facing a speaking challenge. The teachers agreed that the techniques were practical, to the point, and easy to teach and use. Above all, the teachers agreed that their students seem to be more confident about how to answer a specific task and that this confidence appears to have a positive impact on the students' fluency and accuracy. The students do not go about the tasks randomly but rather follow the routine signaled by a certain technique, which benefits those students who need more support and guidance in oral tasks.

Most teachers said that the two picture-bound techniques—*Who, where, what, and why, you can have a try!* and *Now and next, I will pass this test!*—were quite successful with children and encouraged younger learners to continue the writing tasks based on the oral discourse produced in relation to the pictures and the stories. In addition, the *Claim, Support, Question* technique seems to have been highly effective for interactive communication with teenagers and adults. Some adult learners reported using the technique as a guide at work when they take part in meetings because it helps them visualize how to organize their speaking turns. Although they had to depart from the technique in the course of the meetings, it gave them an overall structure for confidence in a somewhat stressful communicative situation.

CONCLUSION

We hope that these techniques will contribute to shaping our students' thinking and, as a result, their oral discourse. In brief, if our students learn to conceive of ideas following a strategic organization reinforced by awareness-raising, modeling, and anchoring of the techniques by means of rhyme, gestures, movement, and analogy, then their discourse will be framed within the structure provided and away from random oral discourse. We do need to be aware that the development of oral discourse can occur only over time and requires a consistent approach by the teacher to contextualize work in the classroom, provide opportunities for interaction, and offer assessment on the part of both the teacher and the students.

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