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"Small Talk": Developing Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity in Speaking

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A major issue that continues to challenge language teachers is how to ensure that learners develop accuracy and complexity in their speaking, as well as fluency. Teachers know that too much corrective feedback (CF) can make learners reluctant to speak, while not enough may allow their errors to become entrenched. Furthermore, there is controversy over the effectiveness of recasts (the most common form of CF) in promoting acquisition. This article explores a methodology, 'Small Talk', which aims to resolve some of the tensions between the need to encourage truly communicative language use and the need to develop complexity and to bring focus on forms into the syllabus in ways that can be recognized as valid and relevant by both teachers and learners. It presents some preliminary research on the viability of this CF methodology premised on attention to, and arising from the needs of, the individual learner.

Accuracy and fluency

Brumfit (1979: 115) was the first to highlight the distinction between fluency, which represents the learner's 'truly internalized grammar', contrasting this with 'overt and conscious accuracy', and proposed that fluency should 'be regarded as natural language use, whether or not it results in native-speaker-like language comprehension or production' (Brumfit 1984: 56). Leaving aside the question of whether learners' fluent production truly represents their 'truly internalized grammar' – after all, it is generally accepted that at least some part of learner language production consists of unanalysed, formulaic chunks – we should note that Brumfit's definition of 'natural' is clearly more practical than theoretical: 'natural' means originating in the speaker (not parroted from the teacher or materials), in response and sensitive to the task at hand, meaning- not form-focused, and free from intervention from the teacher in any role other than communicator.

In defining *fluency*, most teachers and researchers would probably want to add at least some reference to learners' willingness to speak, to get their ideas across without too many false starts, to respond (appropriately) in conversation, as well as some dimension of automaticity and speed. There is less agreement, however, on how to achieve this automaticity. In fact, this can be seen as the central debate in SLA over the last forty years, with one position that exposure to comprehensible input is the necessary and sufficient condition for automaticity to occur (Krashen 1982), another that declarative knowledge becomes procedural knowledge only with focused practice of grammatical forms, and a third that without conscious attention to the 'gap' between what is intended and what can be produced, the long-term accuracy of any automatic production will be inconsistent at best (Schmidt and Frota 1986).

The limitations of contemporary language pedagogy

When Brumfit introduced *fluency* and *accuracy* as key concepts in the understanding of both linguistic competence and syllabus design, he was arguing a middle ground

which, it seems, largely fell on deaf ears. For instance, he proposed

> allowing people to operate as effectively as they [can], and attempting to mould what they [produce] in the desired direction, rather than explicitly teaching and expecting convergent imitation (Brumfit 1984: 50).

That is, instead of giving learners language items to imitate and expecting their imitations gradually to conform to the model, teachers could discover what learners actually wanted to say, and then teach them how to say it in the target language. However, leaving learners to their own devices to produce 'natural language use' is still rare, partly owing to the fear of exposing students to each others' errors, but also because in most curricula, students rarely have extended opportunities to produce language for themselves at all.

Many teachers resist CLT because it does not have 'concrete', 'tangible' content, and therefore does not equate with 'real' teaching. This is hardly surprising, since the one area in which language teachers have traditionally had expertise, the structure of the language, is off-limits in CLT; all that remains is coaching learners on how to get their message across, which in the final analysis can be done with very limited linguistic resources, provided that formal accuracy is not a major concern or a concern at all. Indeed, Gatbonton and Segalowitz see 'no provisions in current CLT methodologies to promote language use to a high level of mastery through repetitive practice,' noting 'focused practice continues to be seen as inimical to the inherently open and unpredictable nature of communicative activities' (2005: 327). Thus, while we can fairly assume that a teacher-centred classroom in which the main focus is on linguistic form will not produce fluency in learners, we can also be confident that a focus on authentic communication alone will not produce accuracy.

It could be that we are at the moment when the pendulum will return towards a pedagogy that prioritizes formal accuracy over communicative fluency, but this seems unlikely for several reasons. First, sociolinguistic research into language varieties has established a strong challenge to the notion that there is a monolithic, 'correct' form against which the language of learners can be measured. Second, while this challenge is hardly likely to deter the publication of ELT materials which privileges certain varieties over others, together with advances in corpus linguistics it has increased pressure on researchers, materials writers, and teachers to check their linguistic intuitions against corpus data, which continues to shed light on the importance of context at both the linguistic and sociolinguistic level. Finally, language-teaching methodologies have become increasingly humanistic, stressing the importance of the individual learner in the language acquisition process. The heterogeneity of linguistic competence, learning styles, strategies, and degree of social investment of language learners is precisely the impetus for greater research efforts into pedagogical methodologies that depart from the prescriptive syllabus and encourage the reflective and intuitive capabilities of teachers. The time is right for a responsive pedagogy premised on careful attention to, and arising from the needs of, the individual learner.

The role of corrective feedback in fluency activities

Corrective feedback (CF) literature to date has, with very few exceptions, examined feedback provided by teachers during teacher-fronted activities, in which the teacher controls the activity itself as well as the type and quantity of language produced. To a large extent this is a factor of research design and methodology, since most observational studies are done in teacher-fronted classrooms, and most experimental

research seeks to reproduce conditions found in such classrooms. However, while there is every reason to engage in research of CF in prevailing conditions, there is a danger that the dissemination of such research has created a self-fulfilling prophecy: teacher-trainees learn about state-of-the-art CF techniques – say recasts – from the literature and then bring these into their own classrooms where, it is later observed, recasts are the most common CF technique. Research into the effects of such feedback has tentatively suggested a positive role for CF in the form of recasts, but has been weakened by methodological issues such as the interpretation of teacher intent and learner perception of recast moves (Mackey et al. 2007) and the controversy over learner uptake as an indicator of either noticing or actual acquisition. Whether or not recasts are the most effective form of CF (see Ammar and Spada (2006) for a contrasting view) the pedagogical goal remains, to recall Brumfit, 'convergent imitation'.

What would an alternative pedagogy and CF methodology look like? Brumfit talks of guiding the teacher 'in his attempts to modify the learners' self-developed systems as reflected in the fluent language behaviour' (1979: 115), claiming that teachers 'need to look at genuine language use in the classroom, to the extent that it can ever be really genuine' (Brumfit 1984: 52). To do so, however, presupposes two conditions: fluent – and genuine – language behaviour, and a mechanism for encouraging learners to focus on the formal aspects of their production. Skehan (1996) suggests that these are unlikely to occur simultaneously, since students engaged in genuine communicative interaction are likely to be too focused on meaning to pay attention to form. The same must be said of teachers, however: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to participate in (let alone to direct) a genuinely communicative interaction while simultaneously paying attention to and remembering the form of the utterances the participants produce. Therefore a third condition is that teachers be free to listen carefully to both form and content of student utterances, which means being free from the onus of directing or even of participating in the interaction. This would truly permit a teachers to become the expert on the language their students actually use and to design effective pedagogies to help them progress; and it would bring much-needed content to CLT, and highly relevant content at that. The 'real teaching' that teachers feel is currently missing would be the language that the learners are striving for at that moment, rather than the arbitrary syllabus imposed by textbooks. And finally, since language learning occurs over time and learners' 'self-developed systems' are likely to change at different rates, it is essential that the CF methodology be responsive to the needs of the individual learner, and that there be some systematic means of collecting, analysing, and storing the data collected.

The communicative methodology: 'Small Talk'

'Small Talk' began as an experiment in learner-centred, reflective teaching of oral communication over twenty years ago (Harris 1998), and has developed into a comprehensive approach to developing accuracy and fluency in oral production. It takes the seminar approach to instruction, in which students use their communicative ability in conversation sessions without intervention by the teacher, and then receive feedback. Each session has a pre-appointed student 'leader', who is responsible for choosing the topic, providing questions and relevant vocabulary to further the discussion, putting classmates into groups of three to four, timing the conversation, and leading a 'check-in' session at the end, in which each group reports to the whole class on their conversation. The stages and timing of a 'Small Talk' session are usually similar to that shown below.

1	The day before the session, the leader announces the topic.	
2	At the beginning of the session, the leader writes discussion questions and vocabulary on the board, re-introduces the topic, and clarifies any confusion; the leader also puts the students into groups of 3–4 and tells the students to begin.	(3–5 minutes)
3	Groups discuss the topic.	(15–20 minutes)
4	The leader asks the groups to bring their conversation to a close and prepare for check in; the groups decide what to report to the class and who will do it.	(5 minutes)
5	The leader invites each group to check in with the class about the highlights of their group's conversation.	(5–10 minutes)
6	The leader thanks the class and reminds them of the next 'Small Talk' date and leader.	(1 minute)

The students are encouraged, in stages 4 and 5 above, to reflect and report on the dynamics of their interaction and their own part in it. This makes explicit the quality of conversational interaction as both a cultural construction and a quantifiable variable. The teacher, having no role in or responsibility for interaction, is able to observe and after the activity to suggest ways in which it could be improved. In a typical 50-minute class, there are usually ten minutes at the end for 'coaching', which is the teacher's response to the interaction and dynamics of the 'Small Talk' session. This coaching tends to focus on different aspects depending on the students and teacher. For instance, quiet or non-fluent students might need additional practice in getting their point across; dominating talkers need to learn to invite others to participate; and all students are encouraged to 'listen actively', showing their comprehension or otherwise of interlocutors.

'Small Talk' has proved extremely popular with students and, at least from teachers' untested observations, very effective in raising the level of fluency of students in general and particularly of students from educational backgrounds in which verbal participation is not encouraged. It is also effective in increasing the students' pragmatic competence since it gives them an opportunity to practise, in a relatively low-stress environment, the kinds of speech acts they would need in higher-stress interactions in the wider community. However, in addition to this kind of strategies-based teaching, students understandably want to know what they are *not* doing successfully, and 'Small Talk' also gives the opportunity for teachers, as listeners and observers of their students, to focus on their accuracy.

'Small Talk' worksheets

Bearing in mind that the goal is for the teacher not to intrude in the conversation with recasts and other corrective moves, the provision of CF has been addressed systematically. It would be impossible for teachers to listen to four or five conversations (or however many groups there are) simultaneously, but they can catch a portion of each conversation, listening to each group in turn for approximately five to seven minutes and writing down inaccurate language use, whether it interferes with the communicative flow or not.

Teachers then enter the samples (typically 15 to 50 per 'Small Talk' session) into a computerized database, noting the date of the 'Small Talk', the topic, and the name of the speaker. Teachers also occasionally highlight an item for all students to correct,

regardless of who said it, which allows them to focus the attention of the entire class on specific language points. This option is especially useful in cases where several students are making similar kinds of errors. The database produces a worksheet of these errors (Figure 1), which is normally made available to the students within 24 hours of the conversation.

Spring I, 2008 Level 105		WORKSHEET 3	Topic: 'My Favourite Place'	2/5/2008
Sentence	Expression	Speaker	Pronunciation	Context/Vocabulary
1	This is the natural park which called Kanding.	Terry	national/natural?	
2	Kanding is place name?	Taka		

Figure 1: Excerpt of a 'Small Talk' worksheet

If certain individuals dominate the conversations, of course, this collection of errors would be biased towards those individuals and some students would rarely be heard by the teacher. Consequently, two mechanisms are in place to counteract this effect. First, the teacher addresses this domination during the coaching sessions and explicitly teaches discourse strategies to reduce it. Second, because the database keeps a running tally of the speakers and their errors, it is possible to form groups consisting of individuals who have not been heard as frequently (and who often tend to be the quieter, less dominant types) and spend more time – even the whole session, if necessary – listening exclusively to them.

Corrective feedback options

Giving learners a written transcription of their errors might enable them to correct any 'slips' or 'mistakes' they have made, and it might push them towards a more stable interlanguage form in cases where there is variability, but it would have limited pedagogical value beyond that. If learners truly do not know how to say something because they lack the appropriate structure or vocabulary, they are unlikely to have it a day later unless they are motivated enough to find out on their own how to say what they were trying to say.

Some form of guidance is therefore necessary to facilitate more accurate production in the future. Two choices present themselves: either provide the students with some sort of written metalinguistic feedback to enable them to locate and correct the error, or simply give them a reconstruction of the sentence as a competent speaker might say it, and let them work out where the differences are. The first option (Figure 2) has intuitive appeal and widespread support in the literature, especially the literature on feedback in writing (Ellis 2009).

Spring I, 2008 Level 105		WORKSHEET 3	Topic: 'My Favourite Place'	2/5/2008
Sentence	Expression	Speaker	Pronunciation	Context/Vocabulary
1	*art.* *ww?* This is the natural park which called Kanding.	Terry	national/natural?	
2	*art.* Kanding is place name?	Taka		

Figure 2: Worksheet with metalinguistic feedback

The second option is to provide a target-like reconstruction for the students in the form of audio recordings of the reconstructions. The digital recording (in MP3 format) is provided to the students along with the printed worksheet, and the students read their original (erroneous) utterances and listen to the reconstructions, comparing the two and trying to locate and correct the errors. As in a dictation, students have to listen very carefully to hear some of the less salient grammatical features (in particular, articles and verb inflections) and often have to bring the problem back to the teacher and ask where the difference is. However the feedback is provided, the students keep a running list of their own errors, on which they are tested every three to four weeks. The test consists of looking at a clean copy of their running list, and orally correcting as many of them as they can in a given amount of time, usually two or three minutes.

Pedagogically, both options satisfy teachers' concerns that students actually do something with the CF, and in theoretical terms the hypothesis is that this level of focus is more likely to lead to acquisition than the 'uptake' of simply repeating a recast. Since this is delayed CF, there is no immediate communicative need for the information; the moment has passed. However, it might better help them to 'notice the gap' (Schmidt and Frota 1986) *because* there is no simultaneous pressure to communicate. It also constitutes both explicit positive evidence and implicit negative evidence about the language (Long et al. 1998).

Research on 'Small Talk'

A small-scale study of 'Small Talk' was done with a class of twelve adult intermediate students over the course of a sixteen-week semester at an ESL school in North America. Ten of the weekly 'Small Talk' sessions were videotaped (see Appendix), and four of these were randomly selected for analysis. The conversations were transcribed and utterances with errors were identified. Five teachers were asked to watch the videos independently and make worksheets, and their worksheets were compared. In this way, it was possible to address the following questions:

1 **Do students make more errors during 'Small Talk' than during a traditional, teacher-fronted class?** If students communicating with each other using whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal do not make more errors than during more tightly-controlled forms of classroom interaction, then a strong case can be made for the methodology that encourages such communicative practice.
2 **What percentage of students' errors receive CF, and what percentage of uptake is there?** If teachers are as able to identify errors in the flow of student-to-student conversation as in teacher-to-student conversation, then it cannot be claimed that the teacher-fronted activity is superior.
3 **Do some students receive more CF than others, and if so, why?** Any CF methodology that cannot accommodate individual differences would be of limited value, so it is important to attempt some measurement of the focus on individual students by teachers.

In answer to the first question, the results from the four 'Small Talk' transcripts are shown in Table 1.

Topic	Word count	Turns	Errors	% of turns with errors
Favorite Place	1756	308	87	28%
Traditional Food	2795	326	111	34%
$1 Million	2723	344	95	28%
Generation Gap	2696	279	106	38%
Total	**9970**	**1270**	**399**	**31%**

Table 1: Count of words, turns, and errors in four transcripts

In this study, there were 1270 turns in 124 minutes; by way of comparison, Lyster and Ranta's (1997: 52 and 62) oft-cited study documented 3268 student turns in 1,100 minutes. Lyster and Ranta do not include word counts, but in turn count alone the students in their study were speaking 3.5 times less than students in 'Small Talk'. The percentage of student turns with error in both studies is almost the same, 31% in this study and 34% in Lyster and Ranta's (1997: 52), meaning that the speakers left to their own devices not only spoke more, but also did not make more errors than those in a teacher-controlled activity.

To address the second question, the count of student errors on each teacher's worksheets was calculated as a percentage of the count of student errors identified in the transcripts. Table 2 gives the average percentage of each teacher's total identification of errors.

Teacher						Mean
T1	**T2**	**T3**	**T4**	**T5**	**T6**	
34%	46%	36%	57%	42%	24%	**40%**

Table 2: Percentage of errors identified by teachers

The level of error identification by the teachers ranged from 24% to 57%, giving an average over the four conversations of 40%. Even the low figure here would probably be acceptable: if students knew that even a quarter of their errors would be identified by their teacher, they would certainly not feel that they were wasting time, let alone if they could be confident that around 40% of the errors were being targeted. A comparison can again be made with Lyster and Ranta's study, in which 62% of student errors receive some form of feedback from the teacher, but only half of those resulted in 'uptake of some kind', and only 27% in repair. In their words, 'from the perspective of the total number of errors produced by students, only 17% of errors eventually lead to repair' (Lyster and Ranta 1997: 53), compared to 40% of student errors in 'Small Talk', 100% of which lead to uptake and repair (since the students have to correct the worksheets).

In addressing the third question, the errors of each student identified in the four transcripts were compared to the errors for each student on teacher worksheets. In addition, the number of errors for each student identified by the classroom teacher (T1) over the entire semester, in other words the amount of CF that the students actually received during the semester, giving a point of comparison for bias (Figure 3). The three students who were not present for the entire semester, S2, S4, and S11, have been excluded from this analysis.
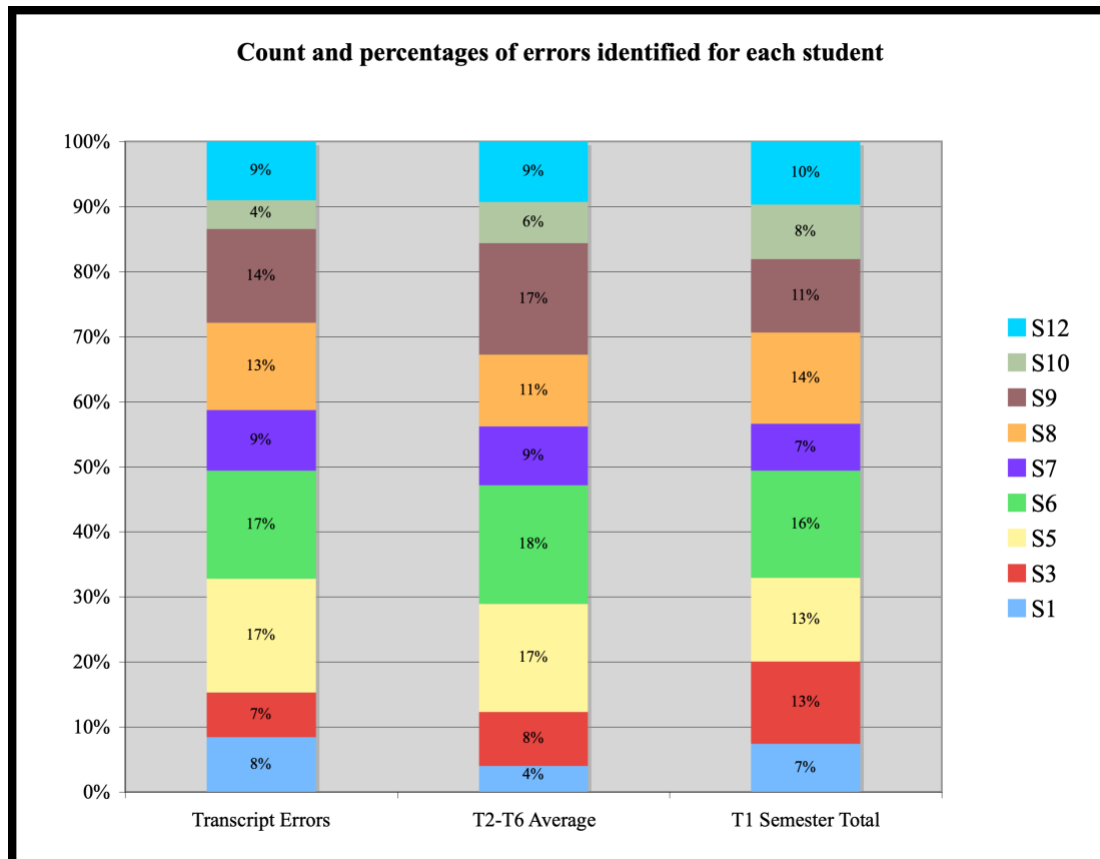
Figure 3: Identification of errors for each student in transcripts and by teachers

The correlation between total error count from the transcripts for each student and numbers of errors occurring on the worksheets of teachers was .87. It is possible, of course, that given the random sampling procedure (the students were grouped by the leader, the video recorded a 5–7 minute sample of their conversation either at the beginning, in the middle, or towards the end), some students featured more than others and therefore that the teacher identification of errors would be skewed more towards them than others. It turns out, however, that all teachers identified more errors for students who were more inaccurate overall. In other words, the CF provided closely reflects the needs of individual students.

Conclusion

Teachers frequently tell students that it is okay to make mistakes, that they will not make progress unless they talk more. However, teachers also frequently complain about the number of 'basic' errors that their students make. Willis reminds us of the reasons for the inevitability and desirability of this fact: errors are part of the developmental process, that 'it is the learners' *attempts to mean* that pave the way for learning' (2003: 110–111, emphasis added) and for noticing what they need to learn; and that to wait for accuracy to develop before putting their language to work is to slow or stall acquisition.

'Small Talk' is an example of what Willis calls 'improvisation', in which 'learners are obliged to make the most of the language they have at their command'. Willis contrasts this with 'consolidation', which would more accurately describe most classroom tasks, in which 'learners think through carefully what they want to say' (Willis 2003: 22). While many teachers would argue that the linguistic anarchy

resulting from allowing students at an intermediate or lower level to 'improvise' in the classroom could be dangerous, I agree with Willis that opportunities for improvisation in the classroom are essential. This research has attempted to show that such improvisation is possible and that it encourages fluent language use, what Brumfit would call 'genuine language use'. Although this paper does not address the discourse structure of the conversations, the transcripts show, as Jane Willis notes, that 'in the absence of the teacher, [students'] interaction becomes far richer' (1992: 180).

Furthermore, the CF methodology under investigation appears to target learners differentially, in response to the their self-developed systems. It compares very favourably with Lyster and Ranta's (1997) study of CF in both the quantity of student interaction and CF provided. The research has not attempted to show any link between the CF provided and the development of formal accuracy and restructuring, although it is possible that carefully designed experimental research could address this question.

[3985 words]

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Appendix

Small Talk sessions, 105/6, Spring 2008. Bold items represent videotaped sessions.

Level	Date	Worksheet#	Topic
105	23-Jan-2008	1	Sports
105	28-Jan-2008	2	Childhood
105	12-Feb-2008	4	**Celebrations**
105	18-Feb-2008	5	**Dancing and Parties**
105	26-Feb-2008	7	How to Look After your Body
106	25-Mar-2008	**1**	**Cohabitation**
106	27-Mar-2008	**2**	**Crime and Punishment**
106	1-Apr-2008	3	Your Dream
106	15-Apr-2008	**5**	**Conflict**
106	17-Apr-2008	6	Discussion of novel *Whirligig*
106	22-Apr-2008	**7**	**Teamwork**
106	29-Apr-2008	9	One Day Left on Earth

Table 3: 'Small Talk' sessions