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Classroom Register and the Non-Native English Speaker

ERROL VIETH

Like fish swimming in water and not recognizing the liquid surroundings, we, as teachers, do not easily understand the complexity of the language environment as it manifests in the classroom. For us and, to varying degrees, for the Australian born pupils, English is a fairly simple matter apart from certain technical language or the occasional complex structure. The same cannot be said for those pupils for whom English is a second language. At some time in their teaching lives many teachers of English or other subjects will have to teach pupils whose first language is not English.

The assumption is often made that the 'migrant' pupil will be able to follow to some degree both the written subject material and the language through which the subject material is presented after a brief period of intensive English classes. By looking at the language used in the classroom, this paper shows that such an assumption would presume a knowledge of the language that could not be gained through a relatively short English as a Second Language course.

This paper looks primarily at the language of discourse within the classroom as suggested by Labov. (1970:54) This is not to suggest that the language content of written units is not important but simply that constraints of length prevent anything more than a superficial examination of the written language of two units of the subject English.

In this paper the term 'register' means the vocabulary and language structures specific to the classroom. The term ESL pupil refers to those pupils for whom English is a second language and whose competence in the language is low. Recently arrived immigrant children or those of non-English speaking background are specifically in mind.

The class surveyed was a year 10 English class comprising a vast majority of students who were born in Australia. Seven lessons were recorded over a period of five weeks. The class comprised boys whose chosen subjects were primarily technical. The pupils were regarded as non-academic by other teachers. The school serves a low socio-economic area with a significant minority of pupils living with only one natural parent. Like many other classes in the school this particular class was regarded as difficult by the administration and the majority of teachers with whom I spoke. Labov (1970) theorises that this perception of difficulty is a result of a cultural conflict between the culture of the pupils and that of the school. Bernstein (1971) believes that the solidarity of the pupils comes about partly through their

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identification with a 'restricted' code of language which is reinforced by peers. These two analyses go some way in explaining the 'difficulty' reported by some teachers and also indicate possible problems for the ESL pupil. These matters shall be discussed further into the paper.

The register used in this class both by me as the teacher and the pupils was of three types: administrative, instructional — meaning to give instructions — and language related to content. The register used in these three areas will be explored and potential difficulties for the ESL pupil will be pointed out.

Instructions

Instructions were often given in the passive voice when such instructions related to work the students had to do.

examples: 'It should be written in your exercise book.'

'The work should be finished by Friday.'

The passive voice could be difficult for ESL pupils even if they do have some knowledge of the difference between active and passive, as the oral pattern requires immediate response whereas the written form is able to be deciphered at some later date. The passive voice is not common in spoken English outside the school but is quite common in education English. (Taylor 1979:238) Thus the pupil may rarely hear the passive voice outside the school environment.

In addition the use of the modal 'should' in the first example and in the utterance 'You should already have it written down' implies a command with the hint of a penalty if the command is not, or have not been, carried out. In normal use 'should' often implies advice; 'must' and 'have to' are used when a stronger meaning is expressed. In the classroom context 'should' has a slightly different function from its everyday use. The subtleties of meaning are only revealed through an exploration of the social and linguistic context.

Other commands used the imperative. Examples are as follows:

- a) 'Listen!'
- b) 'Give the books back.'
- c) 'Make sure . . .'
- d) 'Fit it in there if you can.'
- e) 'Read the first section.'

The imperative would be relatively simple for most ESL pupils who had had some previous English instruction. The commands c) and d) would be more difficult simply because they do not refer to concrete actions.

Administrative

Much of the register was concerned with matters of administration such as the arrangement of dates for oral assessment and comments on work or the utterances of pupils. In these matters I often used idiomatic and colloquial language.

examples: f) 'You're on next Monday.'

- g) 'I might be 'round to look at those during the course of the lesson.'

The former utterance refers to the date of a pupil's oral assessment. For an ESL pupil the idiomatic expression could present difficulties. The latter statement is complex both in language and function. Linguistically the statement is idiomatic. In formal English the use of 'come' instead of 'be' would be correct as 'be' indicates a state and 'round' indicates motion. It is the idiomatic aspect of this common structure which could present difficulty. The use of the infinitive as an adverb and subsequent adjectival and adverbial phrases adds to the complexity of the sentence. The word 'course' used in the sense of a period of time might also present difficulties.

While sentence g) might conceivably be intelligible in the linguistic sense to an ESL pupil, the function of the utterance might be unclear. The sentence has an element of threat in it. It implies that students should do their work as there is a chance it will be checked and a punishment imposed if it is not done. This is a subtle shift in function from the usual meaning of the utterance outside the classroom.

Content

Most of the language time was related to what was being taught — the area of content. There are two divisions within this category; oral language used in the teaching or assessing of the particular area and the specific written language of the theme or topic.

Part of one of the recorded lessons was a spelling test of ten words from a list that year ten pupils are expected to learn over the course of the year. The words were reasonably difficult and pupils were expected to discern differences between words such as 'alter' and 'altar' from the context of the sentence.

examples: h) 'The next one is 'alter' as in 'to change something'.

- i) ' "Altar" — the table used in some churches.'

- j) ' "Aluminium" — aluminium is often used as a substitute for steel.'

- k) ' "Amateur" — people participating in amateur sport do not receive payment.'

Because the pupils are well aware of the way in which these tests are given they have few problems understanding what is going on. For an ESL pupil, picking the particular word from the context might be more difficult especially if the sentence used to illustrate the word is complicated and if the sentence is spoken quickly. The ESL pupil not only has to know the word but be able to decipher and understand the sentence.

In the correction phase of this work sentences such as 'Number six was "accommodation"' are peculiar to this type of testing and difficulties could be encountered by the ESL pupil if the particular structure was unfamiliar.

Another area of activity was the oral talks mentioned previously, given by the students with some discussion and co-operative assessment following each talk. Comments from the students will be discussed later. At this time only my own language will be analysed.

examples l) 'We want constructive comments only.'

- m) 'His style of speaking left a lot to be desired.'

- n) 'You have to talk to people and not to your book.'

- o) 'What was it worth?' 'Do you think it's worth. .?'

- p) 'Anybody else?'

- q) 'I'm trying to compare it with the others.'

- r) 'Let's not have "I'll give him . . ." — Let's hear "Why. . ."'

Sentences such as n) are not common. Talking to a book, without the context being known, might be regarded as somewhat queer. The meaning of such a sentence would be difficult for ESL pupils; it is peculiar to the classroom environment.

Example o) refers to the abstract notion of 'value'. This notion is normally applied to concrete articles but in the school situation it applies to the presented item, written or oral. Its use outside the school environment is probably not all that common; value is more often expressed through expressions such as 'How much is it?' or 'What does it cost?' and relevant replies. Assessment of people or of their work in these terms is not as prominent outside the school environment and the concept of worth is expressed and thought about in different terms. It is likely that its use in the school environment would present difficulties for the ESL pupil.

Expressions such as p) are also unique to discussion situations in the school environment. It is an informal expression yet would present difficulties for the ESL pupil. Notions of comparison such as that in q) may also be unfamiliar although comparisons are part of the early work in ESL courses based on functional-notional ideas. However, the implied meaning of the sentence may present difficulties. Indeed, in the context of the discussion the expression was uttered with some force in response to a pupil's statement that an assessment was unfair. The function of the expression was to justify some prevarication on my part as to the final assessment.

The expressions m) and r) are quite complex and in the case of m), relatively sophisticated. It is doubtful whether 100% of the pupils understood m) although that may be underrating them. However it would be safe to say that they would not use such expressions themselves and an ESL pupil would probably hear such an utterance rarely in his/her school experience. It would almost certainly be incomprehensible.

Example r) relies on inflection, change of tone and pauses to convey its meaning as well as the language itself. For someone to understand the utterance these elements need to be deciphered. To do so requires a sophisticated, albeit unconscious knowledge of the language. For an ESL

pupil, such sophistication would require previous conscious assimilation of the knowledge of these elements to understand the meaning of the utterance and the instruction implicit in the utterance. The instruction is that the pupils should not only suggest an assessment grade but to give reasons why such a grade should be given.

Linguistically, the imperative 'Let's' has the function of an instruction in this context. It is not a suggestion as may be the case outside the classroom; for example, 'Let me go' or 'Let me be'. Neither does it have the meaning of allowing someone to do something as in the utterance 'I let her . . .'. In the classroom environment the use of 'Let's' as an instruction could present difficulties for the ESL pupil.

This type of oral/discussion situation could be the most difficult for the ESL pupil to follow and comprehend. There is nothing written down that the pupil can follow; the discussion flows to and fro and in this class irrelevancies and tangential information are often introduced. For this group the niceties of raising one's hand and waiting for acknowledgement from the teacher before speaking are almost totally absent. Pupils do not build on a point previously made. While listening to the tapes of the lessons it was often difficult to decipher what a student had said. Linguistically such conversations were noted for their idiomatic and slang expressions on my part and that of the pupils, as evinced by some of the examples given above. Sentences were often chopped short; non-verbal language on my part and that of the pupils added different meanings to the expressions. For the ESL pupil the difficulties are compounded by this combination of non-standard elements. **The ESL pupil has to learn this non-standard language as well as the standard.** Such teaching does not happen in ESL classes. He/she has to learn in effect, two different systems of rules. (Labov 1970:14)

The written language content of the subject would demand a lot of the ESL pupil. It is plausible, however, that this difficulty might be easier to overcome than the oral content discussed previously. The language is written, thus the pupil is able to return to unknown words and expressions at some later date — requiring extra work of course, but not presenting the pupil with transactions which need to be followed and responded to in a relatively short period of time. This is corroborated by the fact that Indo-Chinese pupils request written notes in most subjects which they can peruse at home. (Beecham 1982:46)

The recorded lessons included sections of two topics with sizeable proportions of written content: the poetry of A B Patterson and a unit on advertising.

In the poetry unit the poems and questions/activities were on printed sheets given to each pupil. The relevant poem was 'The Man from Ironbark', an example of humour in Patterson's poetry. The language of the poem is somewhat dated, word order is changed to satisfy rhyme and rhythm requirements and slang is used extensively. Any verse could be chosen to illustrate these points.

There were some gilded youths that sat along the barber's wall
Their eyes were dull, their heads were flat, they had no brains at all.
To them the barber passed the wink, his dexter eyelid shut,
'I'll make this bloomin' yokel think his bloomin' throat is cut.'
And as he soaped and rubbed it in he made a rude remark —
'I s'pose the flats is pretty green up there in Ironbark'.

Terms such as gilded, dexter, bloomin' and yokel are not often known by non-ESL pupils and not all appear in dictionaries published outside Australia. Expressions such as those in line 2 convey a certain meaning which would not be obvious to an ESL pupil.

Even though these expressions were clarified for the pupils in the class, it was clear from comprehension questions that many pupils did not have a complete understanding of what had occurred in the poem. ESL pupils would have even less understanding of the poem, given that the language, together with the cultural and historical background to the poem, would be completely alien. Without a certain knowledge of these elements, the poem would lose any relevance or meaning.

The second unit was on advertising. Oral expressions used during the study of this unit display a range of style, structure and levels of complexity.

- examples: a) 'What are the two functions of advertising?'
b) 'The purpose of the unit is to learn how to discriminate.'
c) 'What is the theory called?'
d) 'You should already have it written down.'
e) 'The other thing is that it's in black.'
f) 'Do you understand the specifications?'
g) 'Who (sic) does the ad appeal to?'
h) 'What is the tone of the words used in the advertisement?'
i) 'How else does it work on your desire?'
j) 'What is it in the text which works on the desire a consumer might have?'

The preponderance of questions is notable. The function of the questions is not to request information which I as the teacher do not have — as occurs outside the classroom — but to reinforce, revise or test the pupils' knowledge or simply to initiate discussion. All of these expressions would present some difficulty, although the ESL pupil would quickly become accustomed to question forms in the school situation. However, a question such as j) would be difficult, given the use of 'might', the adverbial clause modifying 'it' and the expression 'works on the desire'.

In the written unit the theory the questions refer to is the AIDA theory — Attention, Interest, Desire, Action. These elements were explained and advertisements analysed within this framework. The language of the text was at a reasonably sophisticated level and would not adequately clarify the AIDA theory for an ESL pupil.

An analysis of language in the classroom would not be complete without reference to that used by the pupils in the classroom. This language can be analysed from the linguistic aspect as well as the cultural aspect from which the linguistic elements arise.

At the beginning of the taping sessions the pupils and myself were establishing a working relationship and they were establishing some order amongst themselves. The idea of being recorded was also novel. Their behaviour was initially influenced by these factors. Some intelligible examples of remarks made by the pupils were:

'Shut your face!' (to another pupil)

'They just rave on.' (about one group who had made a point)

'You don't want to get ripped off.'

Doubtless the ESL pupil would be confused by this language and the rapidity with which it was spoken. It is not only the language which would be difficult. Depending on the educational background of the pupil, a degree of 'classroom culture' shock would be experienced by the ESL pupil because of the force of these utterances. A pupil from South East Asia or Taiwan might consider such expressions to be quite incredible and perhaps initially distressing. Comprehension and responses would be affected by this classroom culture. In effect, there could be a 3 way conflict occurring, with the teacher at one apex espousing one particular culture, the English-speaking pupils at the second apex and the ESL pupils at the third. Labov found that the cultural conflict between the middle-class values of the teacher and those of negroes speaking non-standard English was responsible for reading failure in those students. (1970:43)

In addition, the pupils in the class have a high degree of 'solidarity of the (language) code' as described by Bernstein. (1971:81) This code is both a result of past cultural experiences and limits future linguistic codes. The ESL pupil therefore remains outside of this group solidarity for some time. In the light of this, one wonders just how educationally positive it is to follow the direction that

second language learners must be made aware of the differences between the way their friends talk in the playground and a suitable manner of speech for the classroom. (Levin 1981:83)

Conclusions

This discussion has attempted to explore specific classroom language. Areas of difficulty for ESL pupils have been explored and it is obvious that

contrary to expectations, the language of the English subject area is very specialised; some of the vocabulary is not used in everyday speech and the ideas are often more abstract. (Beecham 1982:46)

Not only is the vocabulary not used in everyday speech, but the function of the language in the classroom is often different from the function of the same language outside the classroom. A parallel and interrelated difficulty

for the ESL pupil is the context; the communication expressed by the utterance in the context of the classroom language and culture, and the particular variables which need to be understood so that the utterances can be correctly deciphered. To put it more succinctly,

One and the same sentence, the same set of words in the same syntactic relationship, may be now a request, now a command, now a compliment, now an insult, depending upon tacit understandings within a community. (Cazden 1972:xxix)

There are ways to alleviate many of the difficulties for the ESL pupil, but these would require another discussion.

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