

Teaching strategies – 1

Developing spoken skills: Planning for teaching

These information sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with specific information on issues and strategies currently affecting their students. They provide background information as well as useful references.

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Context

New migrants and refugees enrolling in the AMEP need to use English for many aspects of their everyday transactions in Australia. Their competence in spoken English is often crucial to the success of these transactions. Research undertaken with AMEP learners (Wigglesworth 2003) highlights the concern of learners to be able to successfully engage with a range of Australian institutions that are involved in their daily lives. In particular, learners expressed the need to practise the speaking skills that would enable them to do this. But what exactly does ‘practising speaking’ involve? Does it just involve allowing our students more time to speak? Yates and Williams (2003) reported that some students do feel that they would like a greater opportunity to practise spoken skills in their formal courses. As teachers, we may feel that we already incorporate considerable attention to spoken learning outcomes into our programs, and it may be that the learners do not always recognise a range of activities as specifically addressing speaking skills. For example, although activities such as sequencing dialogues, cloze exercises and the matching of written adjacency pairs are valid learning activities that help scaffold the learning of speaking skills, they also rely heavily on reading and writing. This may lead learners with low literacy skills to focus on the reading and writing component, almost to the exclusion of speaking, which can therefore become something of a secondary event for them.

We may also consider that our learners get considerable exposure to spoken English if this is the language of instruction in our classrooms. While this is true, such day-to-day classroom interaction may not provide learners with much training in extended speaking practice or the scaffolded learning of spoken skills. Nor will it provide learners with the specific spoken language and sociolinguistic

knowledge they will need in a range of contexts outside the classroom.

So how can we, as teachers, best assist learners to develop all the elements involved in successful spoken transactions? This information sheet summarises a framework that has been developed to help teachers plan the teaching of spoken skills more effectively. It then offers some examples of how the framework can be used to create a sequence of activities that help develop a student’s competence in speaking in particular contexts.

Syllabus planning and the CSWE

Before exploring the framework, it may be useful to consider the curriculum used in the AMEP, the Certificates of Spoken and Written English I–III (CSWE), which draw heavily on the notion of genre. A genre can be defined as a predictable pattern that can be identified in similar types of texts – that is, texts that are used to achieve the same type of purpose (Feez 2001). In the CSWE, genres are presented in terms of broad learning outcomes that could be applied to a number of contexts. It is therefore important for the learners to have the patterns of texts made explicit so that they are able to produce similar language themselves. A genre-based cycle of teaching and learning therefore has the following characteristics:

- model texts are presented;
- they are deconstructed and reconstructed;
- teachers support the learners to produce texts through a sequence of scaffolded exercises;
- this scaffolding gradually diminishes as the learner becomes more independent.

The assessment criteria for each learning outcome in the CSWE curriculum document outlines for teachers some of the predictable language features of the spoken texts addressed. These may include the

discourse structure, appropriate staging, and various lexical, grammatical and phonological features. These features and the notion of the teaching and learning cycle can help in identifying and developing some of the activities that may be useful for the development of our learners' spoken skills.

Issues

A framework for planning teaching and learning sequences

There are a range of factors we need to consider in order to develop a scaffolded sequence of activities so that learners can build the skills they need. The steps of the planning framework outlined below are designed to:

- serve as a checklist of what needs to be incorporated into teaching spoken skills; and
- help teachers develop an appropriate sequence of teaching and learning activities.

An overview of the framework is given in Table 1, and the various steps envisaged in the framework are outlined in the rest of this information sheet.

Strategies

What the teacher needs to do

The starting point

The starting point for syllabus development for some teachers may be a topic, theme or task, and for others the genre or text itself. If a teacher is using a text-based approach, the language goals can be framed in terms of the learning outcome from the CSWE: for example, in CSWE I, *for learners to be able conduct a short telephone conversation*.

For teachers using a topic/theme-based approach, this aim can sit under the broader goals of developing the content knowledge and skills associated with the topic. So, for example, the learning outcome

Table 1: A syllabus planning framework for developing spoken skills

Topic / Theme / Task	
If using a topic/theme/task-based approach, select a topic, theme or task that relates to the interests and needs of your learner group as your starting point. (NB: conduct a needs analysis)	
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Language goals	Context
Identify the language goals you want to include in this topic, theme, task (which can be framed as learning outcomes).	Determine the most relevant/interesting context for this learner group.
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Language elements	
Consider the language elements, skills and strategies involved in achieving each of the goals.	
Grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation etc	Social and cultural knowledge
What grammatical structures/vocabulary/pronunciation features etc are embedded in these goals/learning outcomes and contexts? (NB: if using CSWE, some of these are indicated in the assessment criteria)	What information specific to living in an Australian society/culture do the students need to be aware of?
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Activities	Resources
Brainstorm and select appropriate activities (communicative tasks/scaffolded language learning exercises/excursions etc) that address the language elements and social and cultural knowledge. (Consider the balance of activities that involve reading and writing, and those involving speaking.)	Brainstorm/select/create appropriate resources.
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Assessment and evaluation	
Identify/develop appropriate assessment and evaluation activities.	
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Sequencing	
Determine the sequence of activities. (See Figure 1)	

'Can conduct a short telephone conversation' could be located in a broader theme or unit of work orienting students to learning in Australia. A good source on how skills practice can be integrated with content can be found in the AMEP Fact sheet – Teaching issues 3: *Enhancing language teaching with content* (Williams 2004), which outlines content-based language approaches.

Identifying relevant contexts for learning

It is important that we give learners the opportunity to develop their spoken skills in the contexts they will find most relevant to their needs. Some of this information on needs may come directly from our learners through some type of needs analysis conducted in the classroom, and some may come from what we, as teachers, know about the demands of participating in Australian society. When undertaking a needs analysis, it's important for us to make sure we drill down into what is really the most relevant and authentic context for the development of language skills. So, for example, when planning teaching and learning activities around developing telephone skills, it is unlikely that learners will want to conduct a short telephone conversation in English with a friend or relative, as they are more likely to use their L1 for this. It might, however, be important for learners to be able to ring the school if they or their child is absent. This, then, could be seen as a relevant context for the teaching/learning sequence, as it will be practically useful, both immediately and as a rehearsal for what might be expected in the workplace.

Identifying grammatical, lexical and phonological features

The CSWE curriculum document provides information on the identified patterns of the spoken genres in the form of the assessment criteria of the learning outcomes. For the telephoning example, the staging would be: opening a conversation or responding to an opening appropriately, asking or responding to at least one question, and closing the conversation using a standard closing. It can also help identify some of the grammatical structures, vocabulary and pronunciation features that will be useful in the spoken exchange. It will also be necessary to consider features associated with the context itself. For example, if the learner is telephoning the school to leave a message for a teacher, this provides an opportunity for the teacher to include a focus on intelligible pronunciation in context by incorporating activities on word stress in names, and so on.

Outlining sociocultural knowledge needed

In the context of any teaching and learning sequence, it is important for us to consider what information specific to Australian society the learners need to know. In the telephoning example, this could include:

- the appropriateness of ringing to inform of absences, cancelling appointments, etc;
- the level of politeness and politeness markers generally expected;
- general contextual information such as the nature and meanings of different tones of voice over the phone, how to react to a recorded messages, etc.

There may also be sociocultural knowledge that is reflected in the grammatical, lexical and phonological features of the spoken texts. For example, when practising for a learning outcome, such as a complex spoken exchange in a workplace context, the learners need to be aware of the various linguistic devices that can be used to soften requests (such as the use of *could* rather than *can*) and the impact of tone on the way a request is perceived. This type of information can both empower learners in their spoken transactions and make a difference to how successful our learners are in the world outside the classroom.

Brainstorming activities and tasks

In this step, teachers brainstorm the types of input, activities and tasks they will need to incorporate in order to address all those areas they have identified. They should also consider the activities they will need to undertake to determine their learners' needs in relation to this teaching cycle, along with activities that make explicit the social and cultural knowledge needed. It may be useful to distinguish activities that offer direct practice of spoken skills from those that are fundamentally reading and writing tasks in order to ensure that learners are getting sufficient time for extended speaking practice.

Listing potential resources available

A similar brainstorming exercise is conducted to identify a range of print, online and authentic materials that would be useful in this sequence, as well as other resources such as volunteer tutors, community members, speakers etc. Teachers can also note any opportunities for their learners to practise outside the classroom.

Considering assessment and evaluation activities

The teacher notes here what tasks and activities can be used or developed to monitor progress and give feedback, and how the spoken learning outcome will be assessed.

Sequencing the teaching and learning activities

Once the framework has been filled in, the teacher still needs to sequence the teaching and learning activities. In her discussion of text-based syllabus design, Feez (2001) provides a useful model that can be used by teachers to determine the order of

learning activities. The model involves five phases of classroom activity. There is an initial phase of some joint development and exploration of the context by the teacher and learners, followed by a process of highly scaffolded learning, and then, in the final phases, the learner is producing language independently without assistance from the teacher.

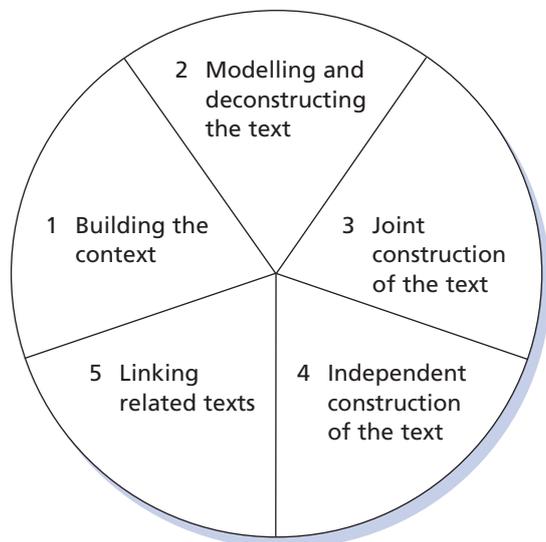


Figure 1: A model for sequencing activities

Source: Feez, S., 2001: 223

Formal assessment could also be included as an additional phase, as shown in the summary below:

- 1 Building the context
- 2 Modelling and deconstructing the text
- 3 Joint construction of the text
- 4 Independent construction of the text
- 5 Assessment of the learner’s performance
- 6 Linking related texts

Using this model, the teacher looks at the activities and tasks identified for this teaching and learning sequence, and determines which phase they match in order to ascertain in which order they will be done. For example, constructing a dialogue from a selection of sentences would fit into a phase of joint construction since the teacher is giving some assistance by providing the language needed and the learner is choosing what is most appropriate and the order of these sentences. A role-play falls into the later phase of independently constructing a text.

The following table gives an example of a range of activities that could be undertaken in a teaching and learning sequence for developing skills in conducting a short telephone conversation and the order in which they could be presented according to this sequencing model.

Table 2: A sequence of learning activities for conducting a telephone conversation

Sample of a teaching learning sequence using 6-phase model
(For CSWE I: <i>Can conduct a short telephone conversation</i>)
Activities for building the context
Needs analysis/student-to-student surveys – eg Have you got a phone?, When do you use the phone? etc. Discussion on cost of calls (local and international etc), comparison between learners’ countries. Focus on sociocultural features – eg Do you need to ring when ... you are not going to school/work? etc. Use of realia: telephones, types of phones (labelling activities/vocabulary building).
Activities that involve modelling and deconstructing the text
Listen to model dialogues on audio cassettes/videos. Pronunciation activities, eg word stress for names, suburbs, telephone alphabet. Listening comprehension (listen for gist, cloze listening tasks, etc). Listen and repeat exercises. Role-play in pairs with scripted dialogue. Analysing the dialogue: match the conversation to the label, for example, opening/closing. Jumbled sentences – ordering dialogues.
Activities that involve joint construction of the text
Constructing dialogues from word charts. Completing dialogues. Adjacency pairs – matching exercise, find your partner, ball games. Pronunciation activities – eg practising tones that convey feelings (friendly, angry, etc), sentence stress to emphasise key words.
Activities that require independent construction of the text
Role-plays/back to back. Role-plays with repair strategies. Write own dialogues. Pair learners with a learner from a higher-level class and record dialogues. Learners telephone each other, eg out of class hours. Practice with Volunteer Tutors.
Possible assessment activities
Learner role-plays phone call to school to inform teacher of absence. Learner phones teacher to give a message of absence. Giving spoken instructions on how to use a mobile phone. Locating a telephone number in the telephone directory. Listening to a phone message.

Time for planning

Classroom teachers have competing demands on their time, and so doing this sort of planning for speaking activities with other teachers can be useful, both in building up a bank of teaching/learning sequences and in potentially extending the repertoires of the teachers involved. In any type of activity involving brainstorming ideas, it is almost inevitable that two or more people will produce more ideas than the single teacher alone. Often, these are the 'forgotten' activities a teacher used previously or implicit cultural dimensions of the target language that another teacher may not have identified.

While an explicit planning process using this type of framework does require a little time, it can be very useful as a collective syllabus development activity, as well as a way of developing checklists of the essential elements for speaking that learners need to cover in order to successfully engage with various aspects of Australian life outside the classroom.

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