



International
Association of Teachers
of English as a Foreign
Language



IATEFL 2014

Harrogate Conference Selections



Edited by Tania Pattison

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6.4 Micro and macro skills in speaking: creating situations for their development

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The aim of this talk was (a) to give theoretical information on what 'micro' and 'macro' skills in speaking are; and (b) to explore some in-class activities which can be used nearly at any language proficiency level and in any context to hone specific speaking micro and macro skills.

Background

The terms 'micro' and 'macro' skills (Brown and Abeywickrama 2010) correlate with the 'can-do' statements used in the CEFR to describe what learners can do at various levels in different skill areas. The micro and macro skills under consideration here were determined during my PhD research; 5 global, approximately 22 macro, and many more micro skills were specified for B2–C1 levels.

In my presentation I focused on two micro skills: 'an ability to handle interjections' and 'an ability to respond spontaneously and almost effortlessly' as they are the most widely used in real life and the least trained in a classroom. These were related to the macro skill 'an ability to handle heckling or audience questions' which is rarely developed and honed consistently in the classroom despite being vital in academic and professional environments.

The importance of micro skills

'An ability to handle interjections' involves the use of set expressions, stock phrases and various language clichés. Not only does this skill allow a speaker to keep a conversation going and/or give the impression of active participation in it, it also helps keep the exchanges in turn and allows the speaker to gain time while formulating what to say.

The significance of this micro skill increases when combined with 'an ability to respond spontaneously and almost effortlessly'. This constitutes the basis for a few macro skills on the levels of reception and interaction, for example, 'an ability to handle heckling or audience questions', such as might arise during a presentation.

Classroom situations for micro and macro skills development

I created a number of tasks to teach my students to deal with extraordinary situations when giving a speech. First we trained these micro skills independently so that

students could use interjections and exclamations in a natural way without them seeming to have been 'learnt by heart'. Then we polished them together as a macro skill; this enabled my students to maintain contact with the audience during a presentation while handling heckling and interjections without getting side-tracked and losing their train of thought.

The tasks I use might be classified into two groups: monologues (prepared in advance or delivered on the spot) and game-like activities (communicative micro situations and role plays). During my IATEFL talk I showed a few activities, gradually increasing the level of difficulty. Taking into consideration advanced language proficiency level of the audience I didn't provide a list of possible introductory phrases, useful collocations and stock phrases, or a range of discourse functions. The participants worked in groups of three: two of them collaborated on a task, and the third evaluated their performance using the set of criteria given.

Activity instructions

In every activity one person ('A') had to give a particular piece of information to a colleague ('B'), whose task was to ask as many unrelated questions as possible to try to side-track the speaker. The questions could not be random, but had to be logically connected. To do this, B had to use linking words and discourse markers. A had to react naturally without losing his/her train of thought. S/he couldn't ignore B's questions. Moreover, A still had to fulfil the main task, which was to inform B. The general tone of the activities had to be neutral and polite. By the last task, participants were also advised against using 'yes' or 'no' while answering their colleagues' questions and were encouraged to use discourse markers and comment closes instead. Every activity lasted approximately four minutes: three minutes for discussion and one minute for feedback from an evaluator ('C').



Figure 6.4.1: Example for Activity 1

Activity 1

Describe a picture to your colleague. Explain the meaning of as many symbols shown as possible—for an example, see Figure 6.4.1.

Activity 2

Choose a quotation and explain its meaning. How far do you agree with the quotation?

Examples:

- A positive effort may not solve all your problems, but it may annoy enough people to make it worth the effort (Herm Albright, 1876–1944).
- Good teaching is one-fourth preparation and three-fourths theatre (Gail Godwin, 1937–).

Activity 3

Come up with a story using the following words. (See Figure 6.4.2.)

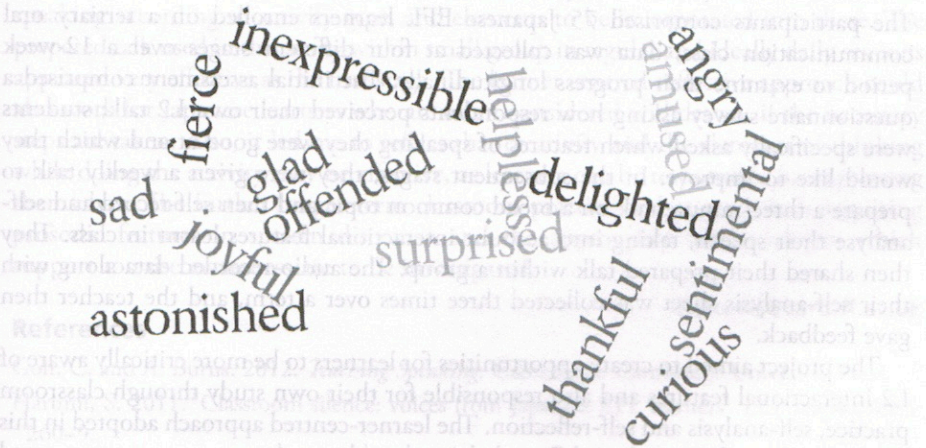


Figure 6.4.2: Example for Activity 3

Comment

Participants admitted that despite being fluent in English it was quite difficult for them to deal with unexpected questions while speaking without getting side-tracked. They also agreed that the honing of micro and macro skills under consideration is very important and the activities shown might be easily adapted to suit different levels, needs and contexts.

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References

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