

In Helping Our Students to Understand Spoken English

by Asst. Prof. San Shwe Baw

Abstract

This article carries just one simple, but important message: to help our students to be able to understand natural spoken English is as equally important as to help them to be able to talk fluently. The main point of discussion is the necessity for exposing our students to both formal and informal varieties of English while we conduct our usual classroom activities.

As a teacher of English as a foreign language, you must have come across students who speak English quite well, but can understand very little of a normal English conversation. I have seen quite a lot of students of that type, but let me discuss one of my most recent encounters with such a student so that I can report the case almost verbatim. In fact, I was not at all involved in the event that I am going to discuss now; however, my position as an unrelated party did enable me to reflect on a weakness that certainly needs to be improved in my teaching.

The case I am referring to is an oral test given by my colleague to an English IV student. On that day at that particular time, I happened to be checking the writings of my students. I certainly would not have noticed anything that was going on with that oral test session had that student's English fluency been just run-of-the-mill. In point of fact, it was his crystal clear accent and exceptionally flawless English that distracted me from the work I was doing. The instructor at first allowed him to talk about simple, personal matters about him (like his university life, his hobbies, etc) probably in an attempt to help him become bolder with his expressions prior to the more natural two-way communication (between the instructor and the student). Impressed by his fluency and accurate English, I found myself mentally writing the full score (10 marks) in his oral test result sheet.

Roughly about 5 to 6 minutes later, the instructor tried to switch that one-way communication to a more natural, interactive form of communication between them by saying "Tell me about some other places of interest in the south of Thailand". While expecting to hear about such places as Phuket and Phi Phi islands, I could not believe my own ears when the student replied, "My mom is not interested in visiting the southern part because it is not quite safe to visit there these days". After a pause, I heard the teacher exclaim, "My God!" The student's response, however, was quite spontaneous: "Oh, even your god can't stop the bullets" he said, accompanied by a merry laugh.

Whatever happened after that point was beyond my knowledge, as I was then concentrating hard on recalling every bit of their conversation in detail. Once I thought I could guess the cause of the communication breakdown; I realized many of my students

could not have been any different than that student in that situation. With that knowledge came a rude awakening: that I had long been overlooking an important aspect in my teaching.

The situation mentioned above also prodded me into thinking about my personal experience as a first year student in the university. In my English classes, I had never had any difficulty in understanding my teachers' explanation, even though a few of them were English or American. The question I was asking myself was: "Why could I understand my teachers so easily, although I found it nearly impossible to understand English spoken outside the classroom?" Thinking about this question and the incident I discussed above in parallel, I felt that something was really beginning to dawn on me.

Students sometimes blame their poor comprehension on the fact that their teachers are not native speakers of English. They seem to feel that if they were able to study with English or American teachers, they would understand the spoken language very well. However, this is not necessarily true. There are today thousands of non-native speakers of English teachers throughout the world whose pronunciations, while not perhaps perfect, are satisfactory for the effective teaching of aural comprehension. As a matter of fact, students who have studied with English or American teachers – whose pronunciation is presumably beyond criticism – are often nearly as poor in their comprehension of spoken English as are those students who study with non-native speakers.

Doubtlessly, any instructor teaching at an institution where English is the medium of instruction uses only English in class. However, it is important to distinguish two different situations in which the teacher uses English in class. One situation is primarily for communication with the students – for imparting information to them. Many class activities are of this sort. For example, the teacher may speak to his class about a literary work or its author, he may explain a problem of grammar, assign homework, or make other announcements. In speaking to the class about such topics, the teacher is conscious of the need to make himself understood as clearly as possible. He may deliberately limit himself to vocabulary which his students understand and he may try to make his pronunciation as clear as possible. The result of these efforts may usually be satisfactory: most of the students understand relatively well. The teacher plays a very active part in this type of classroom activity, whereas the students' role is essentially passive.

Opposed to the above use of English, where communication is the primary goal of the teacher's speech, is another situation in which the teacher's speech serves as a model for the students to imitate – a source that provides the students with another type of English that can be called normal, authentic non-classroom English. Characteristically, this latter type is spoken faster, with certain sounds pronounced less distinctly, and words often run together or connected instead of being clearly separated. For clarity sake, let us call the first type formal English and the second informal English.

One reason our students have difficulty understanding spoken English may be that they do not have the opportunity to hear the informal type of English quite often. Formerly most English instructions tended to emphasize grammar, reading, writing and translation. Teachers talked a great deal about English, but they seldom spoke English itself. Their explanations, comments, and discussions are almost entirely in the native

language of their students. Under these conditions, it is not at all surprising that students have had difficulty understanding spoken English. Although such classes are still found today, they are becoming less frequent. Yet there is still one lingering tendency that many of us are reluctant to shake off out of overmuch concern for our students – purposely attempting to make our English as simple, as slow and as easy as possible, thereby leaving our students totally out of touch with the everyday, unconscious informal variety of English. The reason behind this practice is that our students often complain about how fast English is spoken by their instructors. Usually, however, such an impression is due not so much to the speed with which the language is spoken as to the characteristic of running words together. This, combined with the fact that many of the most frequently used words in English, when unaccented, are not pronounced as the students expect them to sound, and that accounts for much of the difficulty in aural comprehension.

Unable to resist the students' comments, the teachers' models of English for students are often produced with the same clear, precise, easily understandable English as are their explanations and comments which aim primarily at communication. If students are exposed in their classroom only to this type of 'classroom dialect of English', they will undoubtedly have great difficulty in understanding natural spoken English. The problem, however, is not irremediable. We can see a very encouraging sign if we observe how the parents or guardians of a baby help him/her to acquire aural comprehension skills. Obviously they use simple words and unsophisticated structures in their natural language training, but it may be quite an unnatural phenomenon for them to purposely slow down their speech in their attempt to communicate with the baby, even though they may use repetitions as often as necessary in the process. Some might, in this aspect, argue that it is unrealistic to compare the two different ways of language acquisition (L1 Vs L2) as if they were the same, however, we can still reason that adults, with their vast experiences with the world, could be in a better position to cope well with faster speech sounds than a baby.

Therefore, if our objective is to enable our students to communicate, and if comprehension is truly considered an important part of this communication, efforts need to be made on our part to expose our students to informal English as well. In fact, our concern for our students alone may not be the only reason why we do our best to facilitate their comprehension by speaking slowly and by enunciating sounds carefully. The fact that we find ourselves facing an audience - our class - may also reinforce the tendency to use formal English, since a speaker-audience relationship is one of the most important situations when such English is used. Therefore, a certain amount of conscious effort may sometimes be necessary on our part in order for the English we use in our classroom to be more authentic.

The student discussed earlier (the one taking oral test), however good his English is, has difficulty understanding informal English. He seemed to have been confused by the assimilation in some part of his oral test instructor's speech. Instead of pronouncing the three sounds separately like SOME OTHER PLACES as was the habit in class, the instructor, finding himself in a one-to-one situation with the student, might have unconsciously joined the first two together, thereby sounding 'other' like 'mother' due to the influence of the preceding /m/ sound. The student's misinterpretation of the

instructor's exclamation "My God!" also showed his lack of familiarity with informal English. So, if such a proficient student has difficulty with the informal variety of English, we can imagine the seriousness of difficulty with other students who are less proficient. By always sticking to the classroom dialect by which we not only speak word by word, but also oversimplify the vocabulary, we are turning ourselves into overindulgent teachers.

The question now is how effectively we can help our students in their struggle to understand spoken English without frustrating them at all. True, it may not be necessary for our students to make all the informal features part of their own habitual spoken English. Native speakers will obviously have no difficulty understanding the students whose English pronunciation is precise and clear. However, they must nevertheless learn to recognize them in the speech of others. Hearing features of informal English (i.e. contractions, changes in the pronunciation of vowels in unaccented words, assimilation or connecting adjoining words, etc.) in the teacher's models in class as often as possible may be of great help to our students in familiarizing themselves with spoken English. The selected reading passages we use in our classes usually contain an abundant supply of the required resources for the students to practise this variety. At the same time, we can also gradually increase the pace of our speech as the semester wears on without noticeably affecting their comprehension.

Judging from the fact that all of my colleagues in the Department of English are well-experienced in the field of teaching English, the points I have discussed in this article may appear so trivial, as they may already have thought about this issue and some may even have dealt with it successfully. However, I must admit I was really enriched by that bit of conversation I overheard that day. To acknowledge frankly, I have been communicating with my students at a much slower pace than anyone would have expected I would – simply for fear of students' complaint. The discovery that even a student who speaks English well can have difficulty understanding the type of English used in usual situations in everyday life is a rude awakening to me. Certainly, that simple event will always be reminding me of the necessity of helping our learners to recognize some essential informal features for effective comprehension of authentic English.

Asst. Prof. San Shwe Baw joined Au in 1995. He is the Supervising Editor of ABAC Journal. He holds B.A (English), the Institute of Education, Rangoon; Advanced Diploma in ELT, Leeds University, UK; and M.A (TESOL), St. Michael's College, U.S.A.