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## Concerning Oral Language Use and Difficult Situations

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### Abstract

Assumptions are made and discussed about the requirements that need to be satisfied for effective structurally-motivated oral practice, principally in large lower secondary classes. A framework to aid in the generation of different types of such practice according to goal and data is proposed and exemplified. Finally recorded data is provided from the use of an example of one type, and the role of fluency-focused practice considered.

What follows is an attempt to show how the principled oral practice of discrete structural items can be developed from an early stage in difficult situations. In particular this last phrase refers to the typical lower secondary classroom with up to sixty relatively unmotivated learners and a coursebook the backbone of which is a steady progression up a ladder of the verb 'tense' system and whose greatest contribution to oral language use is either pattern practice, possibly disguised as a 'talk about' exercise, or model dialogues ('practice the conversations') which it may --or may not--be practicable to use to develop some kind of functionally coherent role play (taken here to be a separate, if sequentially related, topic). The attempt will not be weighed down by the impedimenta of academic respectability, but is rather designed as a resource that those in the field--especially in the context of INSET programmes--can draw upon.

Among the assumptions it is based on are the following.

In terms of language :

1. some practice will require the learner to use acceptably the form of the item in a context which serves to clarify a specific meaning of that form;

2. other practice will require the learner to find for himself forms appropriate to the context, and risk using them even if their acceptability is not assured.

In terms of learning :

3. learner involvement in the process of using language will be increased through having a goal to reach;

4. the goal should be non-linguistic, that is, it should not comprise merely trying to produce acceptable language (as in a drill), or acceptable language and content (as in orally answering a teacher's *Wh*-question), cf. Maley (1982);

5. the context should be relevant to the experience, interests or concerns of the learner.

These assumptions may be most usefully discussed through an example. (Fig. 1) The following one requires learners to practise *going to* with the meaning of a planned future action.

Figure 1

**Language Focus : going to future**

Each learner in a pair completes a diary page (using the uninflected verb form) for what he is going to do over the following weekend. Then he completes another diary page for what he thinks his friend is going to do at the same time. Learners then take turns asking each other what they are going to do, to see if they guessed correctly; guesses are ticked or crossed, and if crossed, the answer received is written in over the top. Scores are then compared.

DIARY for NEXT WEEKEND for (name) . . . . .	
FRIDAY July 24	evening :
SATURDAY July 25	morning :
	afternoon :
	evening :
SUNDAY July 26	morning :
	afternoon :
	evening :
(name) . . . . .	right guesses . . . . .
(name) . . . . .	right guesses . . . . .
WINNER . . . . .	

ASSUMPTION 1. The phrase 'planned future action' comes from the teacher's book of *Odyssey 2* (Kimbrough et al., 1983), and the coursebook itself makes this meaning fairly clear from its initial presentation ('S1 : What are you going to do tonight? S2 : I'm going to write some letters') in a context which has had to be only very slightly adapted to provide the oral practice example.

Situations using other coursebooks may not receive so much guidance. *Junior Active Context English 2* (Brinton et al., 1974) simply presents the structure in a reading passage ('Their plane is going to leave half an hour after his' -- an idiosyncratic use, to say the least), and makes no comment for the teacher on meaning, merely observing in the handbook for Book 3 that *going to*

is not an alternative to *will* in the result clause of what is usually referred to as the first conditional: in other words, the treatment is at the level of form alone. As Maley (1989) has pointed out, one of the reasons for the pendulum swing since the early 1980s away from method and back to language is the accessibility of new pedagogically-motivated structural reference works, e.g. Chalker (1984), Murphy (1985), and Alexander (1988)-- although two older favourites, Thomson and Martinet (latest edition 1986) and Swan (1980) have both long been available in ELBS (English Language Book Society) editions and are not significantly inferior. The citations in any one of these will in most cases lead to a context that can be developed to clarify a specific meaning. Especially where outdated coursebooks survive, familiarisation with one of these relatively simple reference grammars should be among the first priorities of any pre- or in-service training programme. Acceptable phonological modelling -- in cases where teachers' own proficiency cannot be relied on--can usually be aided by prior study of the coursebook's tape.

ASSUMPTION 2. Since the example was designed for initial practice of *going to*--that is, in terms of accuracy--this assumption does not apply at the structural level. However, learner selection is free to take place at the lexical level--that is, in terms of fluency --although specific prior whole-class practice of useful vocabulary could shift the focus back towards accuracy (the terms 'accuracy' and 'fluency' are used following Brumfit's (1984) definition).

ASSUMPTIONS 3-4. The goal in this example is simply to see how many predictions were correct, thus drawing on learners' affective

involvement (see Vincent 1983). which here is likely to be increased the more closely the two learners working together know each other. Prediction is often one of the easiest ways of creating a goal for predominantly accuracy-focused practice, and it provides a powerful motivating force at many different age levels. In our difficult situations the added control provided by the scoring mechanism is likely to increase motivation. As the framework below shows, three other principal types of goal that can be established are: matching pieces of information, discovering unknown information that another learner has, and sharing information in order to arrive at some kind of decision.

ASSUMPTION 5. Here the data used is provided by the learners themselves, about their own lives. Where the data is game-type (see framework below), and especially where a citation form to clarify a particular meaning has been found in a reference work, development of the context to fit learners' experience, interests or concerns may be needed.

Two further points should be made at this stage. The example demonstrates that oral practice may naturally integrate writing into the completion of the task; once the *-ed* inflection is learned, such practice can also lead to writing a mini-report on the outcome of the task--here, for instance, on which predictions were wrong--that would obviously be accuracy-focused (see Willis & Willis (1987) for the development of this concept at a rather less facile level). And while specific management skills are essential for this kind of practice in a class of sixty --included amongst them are initial whole class practice of the structure, explaining and/or demonstrating procedure and goal,

showing how to conceal data until it can legitimately be revealed, monitoring, following up-experience suggests that these skills are often easier for non-native teachers to acquire than are those needed for much direct language presentation and teacher-focused practice.

No manageable typology for types of goal and data and the possible combinations of both in oral practice can ever be in any way definitive: there will always be overlaps, variations and extensions that cannot be neatly fitted in to it. But the following framework has proved useful in the generation of examples (see Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup>

**Figure 2.**  
KIND OF GOAL

	KIND OF DATA		
	game-type	learners as source	simulated/ authentic
PREDICT what information will be	(1)	(2)	[3]
MATCH 'pieces' of information	(4)	(5)	(6)
DISCOVER another's information	(7)	(8)	(9)
SHARE information and DECIDE	[10]	(11)	(12)

(Numbers are for reference only; those in square brackets indicate types that are not usually found, see comments below.)

The example given above (of *going to*) can thus be seen to be of Type (2): learners provide their own data, and the goal is to discover whether their predictions about their partner are correct. It is not

possible in an article like this to give examples of all the types of practice that can be developed from this framework, but three more may help to make it clearer (see Figures 3, 4 and 5).

Figure 3

Type (1)

**Language Focus :** past simple passive

Somchai likes to stay away from school, but always gives his young brother, Sompong, an excuse to make for him : a snake bit him, a bus hit him, a horse kicked him, a bee stung him, and so on. Learners take the roles of teacher and Sompong in turn, the teacher predicting which excuse (from a closed set) will be made for each day last week when Somchai didn't come to school. Sompong has picture cards corresponding to each of the excuses, and (after shuffling) turns them up to answer the teacher's question about Somchai's absence; the teacher marks his guesses right or wrong. The aim is to score the highest number of guesses after, say, four rounds.

name . . . . .				
LAST WEEK	GUESS ROUND 1	GUESS ROUND 2	GUESS ROUND 3	GUESS ROUND 4
MONDAY				
TUESDAY				
WEDNESDAY				
THURSDAY				
FRIDAY				
WINNER . . . . .				TOTAL CORRECT GUESSES

The data--picture cards--is obviously game-type; the learner's involvement is sustained by trying to guess correctly in order to score points. As was stressed in discussing the example of Type (2), this kind of goal is extremely easy to apply to a wide variety of structures; but unlike that example, the use of a necessarily closed set of picture cards here restrains the choice

of lexis, so that the language used cannot extend beyond the production of specific utterances (as would be required by Assumption 2). The passive form (Assumption 1) is appropriate to the context where Sompong is the 'given', and the relationship of the context to Assumption 5 is self-evident. Again, the scoresheet provides a control to increase involvement.

Figure 4  
Type (4)

**Language Focus :** past simple (*was/were*, regulars, irregulars) Each pair has two sets of cards, one with names of places--*at home, in the park* etc--and the other with pictures of activities--reading a newspaper, watching TV etc. The cards are shuffled and placed face down. One learner then asks the other where he was at a specific time (e.g. last Saturday afternoon); the second learner turns up a card and answers. The first learner then asks him what he did; the second learner turns up a card from the other set and answers. If the two answers fit, the second learner scores a point. Many rounds can obviously be played.

your partner's name . . . . .				
	last Saturday morning	last Saturday afternoon	last Sunday morning	last Sunday afternoon
ROUND 1				
ROUND 2				
ROUND 3				
ROUND 4				
WINNER . . . . .			TOTAL POINTS	

Unlike the closed set of cards used for prediction in the example of Type (1), the set of activity cards in this example can be extended to cover a wide range of actions, so that learners are required to find language to fit the situation (Assumption 2) --although as was seen with the initial example of Type (2), prior whole-class practice of the lexis (and here inflections) that are needed could prevent this. Matching is of course a familiar technique, and with game-type

data is probably best known as a way of practising lexis, lexical sets, and lexical relationships, for example with the games Snap, Pelmanism and Happy Families (all of which are often used to match picture cards and word cards). An example of matching as goal applied to simulated authentic data--Type (6) --could be trying to match a sign-only card to a sign-plus-explanation card (as, for example, in a section from a park guide) with a 'mill' interaction pattern,

in order to practise indirect question forms ('Do you know what this sign means?'). An example of Type (5) could be another 'mill' where learners try to locate those in the class who are in some way similar to them, for example to practise the present perfect tense ('How many times have you been to the National Museum?'). In both of these

last examples the scoring control could be to see how many cards could be identified, or other learners located, in a given time. As all the examples of Types (4) - (6) suggest, matching as goal is difficult to apply to probable sustained contexts, which is why the word 'pieces' is used to describe the information that is matched.

**Figure 5**

Type (7)

**Language Focus :** past simple

Each pair has a set of cards; each card has the name of a place where people like to go on holiday, together with (say) three pictures of activities that one can do there, such as going sailing, climbing, or even watching a beauty contest. The set (unseen) is divided in half, and each learner tries to discover where the other 'went' last holiday by asking him what he did there. To promote coverage of the clues, only one guess is allowed for each answer received, until the last. The aim is to discover the places with as few guesses as possible.<sup>2</sup>

your partner's name . . . . .		
Places on your cards	Your partner's guesses	TOTAL
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
WINNER . . . . .		TOTAL

The point of the term 'discover' in each of types (7) – (9) is that one learner usually has no prior way of knowing anything about the information he is trying to find out from the other--except for its class (here, that it will be a place where people can go for their holidays)--and so has to discover it by asking for clues. A common example of Type (9) --discovering simulated authentic data--is often referred to as Describe and Arrange, where, possibly to practise locational language, one learner has to draw in the missing parts of some kind of diagram or drawing (see the lesson transcript overleaf); scoring may be carried out through the number of parts correctly discovered. Type (8) could be exemplified by learners making their own diagram or drawing first (again to practise locational language), or (to practise less common *Wh*-questions) by learners each choosing another student in the room and writing down certain facts about him--how he comes to school, how often he is absent, how many brothers and sisters he has; in pairs they then have to ask for these facts and use them as clues to discover the identity of the student chosen, in as few guesses as possible.

Types (11) and (12) stem from what is sometimes baldly referred to as 'Information Transfer', and is usually presented as a grid of information, some of which has been differently blanked out on A and B sheets. Thus Type (12) could be exemplified by two different sets of statements from various murder suspects; this information is shared (in order to practise past continuous forms) and then used to decide which suspect was not telling the truth. Another example of Type (12) is provided by what is usually called Spot the Difference--the comparison of two pictures (perhaps practising *there is/*

*are*) in order to decide, for instance, which is chronologically earlier. An example of Type (11) could be where a small group of learners complete given categories to describe their dream holiday, and then share the information (practising 'hypothetical' *would*) in order to decide which holiday all would most like to join.

Examples of Type (10) do not normally seem to occur, perhaps since the act of decision *ipso facto* requires at least a degree of authenticity or learner data provision to make it possible. Similarly, the act of prediction in the sense in which it is being used here seems likely to preclude the use of simulated authentic data, so that examples of Type (3) are equally difficult to imagine.

So far in the discussion of examples of all types, a particular structure or area of grammar has always been specified as the object of the practice. How then can Assumption 2 come into effect? Sometimes, as has been pointed out with the examples given for Types (2) and (4) --and as is also true of the example of Type (7) --the assumption may act at the lexical level. Sometimes what can be referred to as 'procedural' language may--with encouragement--be developed as needed: *You go first/It's your turn/What did you say?/ Could you spell that?* and so on. But at a more significant level, it is nearly always the case that when an example of practice comes from the types that lie roughly towards the bottom right-hand corner of the framework, the greater are the opportunities for it to be treated as fluency-focused.

To illustrate this point, here is a short transcript taken from a lesson taught during a seminar held at Sukhothaimathirath Open University in October 1986. The Secondary 2 class have just finished working



with summary strips of a story they have listened to, and, in pairs, are about to start a Describe and Arrange example (Type 9) – ‘Complete the Drawing (3)’ from *Pair Work A, Pair Work B* (Watcyn-Jones 1981). In this variation of the type, Learner A has a completed plan of how the kitchen should be arranged, while Learner B has not only a blank plan, but also pictures of the items that need to be arranged in it.

(T = Teacher      LA = Learner A  
LB = Learner B)

T ‘A’ student, you must tell your friend, “There was blah blah blah blah, there were,” OK? Just like, “There was a cup on the table,” you must say it like that, OK? If there were, you, you must say, “There were,” something like that, OK?

LA There were two glasses at the, at the – parn. There, there is a teapot on the table. (*pause while LB draws*) The cup and the saucer, er, two cup and two saucer are on the table. Two cups and two saucer are on, are on the table. Two. Are on the table. two. (*pause while LB draws*) The coffee – there is a coffee in the bottom shelf.

LB Bottom shelf. Big one – big shelf or –?

LA Big shelf.

LB Bottom shelf.

LA Small shelf, small shelf.

LB Tea.

LA Coffee. Coffee. And plates too.

LB And plates too. (*pause while LB draws*)  
And plate. And many plate.

LA And many plates too.

LB On the bottom shelf?

LA On the bottom shelf. (*pause while LB draws*) There, there is a – Put the wash – washing powder in the bottom big shelf.

LB Bottom big shelf, wash – (*pause while LB draws*)

LA At the second shelf – big shelf – has two bottles –

LB Second, sec – in?

LA Big shelf – second (*points*) – second sh – has bottle – bottles.

LB Bottles.

LA Bottles.

LB At the second shelf.

LA Uh, uh, second. Second.

LB Second. Fourth?

LA Er, Yes, yes. Fourth shelf. (*pause while LB draws*) Put the plant –

LB Put the plant –

LA At the – at the shelf near the window.

LB At the shelf near the window. (*pause while LB draws*)

LA Put the candle near the window, on the shelf, on the shelf, near the window. (*pause while LB draws*) Put the bucket near the leg of the table.

LB Bucket?

LA Bucket, near the leg of the table.

LB Near the leg –

LA Of the table, of the table.

LB Leg –

LA Table, not chair, not chair, not chair.

T OK everybody stop. Enough for now. I would like to know who can get more . . . .

(actual time of excerpt: 5.07 minutes)

Although the teacher was working on Assumption 1, the level of proficiency of this particular Learner A (chosen at random for recording) enabled him to treat the practice as if it had been given to him on Assumption 2, so that he found the language which seemed most suited to his task. One could hypothesise that it was the authenticity of the data and familiarity of the context that encouraged him to do so: if he was

telling his younger brother or sister how to help him rearrange the contents of his aunt's kitchen after they had cleaned it, he would undoubtedly use the imperative form rather than *there is* (and does the temporary lapse into transfer from L1 -- 'has two bottles' -- happen while he is gaining confidence to continue in his experimental departure from the teacher's instructions?) Interestingly, this excerpt demonstrates every one of Brumfit's (1984) five characteristics that distinguish fluency as natural language use from traditional classroom activity. The language is constructed by the speaker without being received verbatim from an intermediary. The content is determined by the speaker for the demands of the task. Speech is adjusted to the demands of the changing situation. The language is a means to an end. There is no intervention by the teacher as teacher.

But having said this, it is no doubt equally possible that other learners in the class would gain from practising the *there is* pattern that the teacher presumably intended--which after all would be entirely

appropriate if the data was being viewed as closer to game-type. Another recording made on a different occasion where a weaker class had been given a similar example shows the learners struggling hard just to produce that pattern and the five partitives they need for the food items included. Until some level of productive control of specific forms has been achieved through accuracy-focused practice (that will still meet all the requirements of Assumption 1 and Assumptions 3-5), it may not be possible for many learners to move easily into practice based on Assumption 2. Yet, as the transcript shows, some learners can quite soon develop greater resources than teachers are prepared to believe (or even give them the opportunity to use). Perhaps the real value of arriving at the stage where a class has enough confidence to move towards the lower right-hand corner of the framework is that it may then be possible more adequately to make provision for the wide range of language learning ability and proficiency that is likely to exist among its sixty very different members.

## Notes

1. It makes no reference to patterns of interaction, since these are taken to be determined by independent considerations, although in order to maximise language use they will most commonly be 'closed' pair or whole class/large group 'mill', where learners circulate to talk with as many others as possible.

2. Obviously neither learner did go to the places on their cards, but it is precisely the effect that game-type data have in allowing the willing suspension of disbelief that makes them so useful for oral practice in situations where experience is limited--providing of course that Assumption 5 still stands.

### The author

John Laycock over the last fifteen years has worked on a number of different ELT projects in South-East Asia, and at present is completing the establishment of a one-year in-service Diploma offered by Srinakharinwirot University at its Bangkok, Prasarnmitr campus and intended mainly to help secondary-level teachers of English. Principal interest is the development of video recording systems and procedures as an INSET tool.

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