

Recognising and working with emergent language in the ESOL classroom Part 2:

Interaction and learning in small group conversations



Introduction

This research builds on part one, which focused on *student-led* parts of ESOL classes (specifically when student conversations took the lesson 'off plan'). We used recordings and transcripts of these conversations as a tool to help us recognise and work with *emergent language*, which means **working with and expanding the language that students are already using, rather than teaching words and grammar we think they ought to be using.**

The link to part one is below:

https://practitionerledactionresearch2014.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/tower-hamlets-report_web.pdf

Most of the recordings from **part two** were taken from students speaking in small groups. We specifically wanted to:

- Take a closer look at the interaction patterns in these group conversations to see in what ways this interaction could be beneficial to learning.
- Combine the transcripts from both projects to build a database of learner conversations, which we could use to compare the language our students actually use, with what we focus on in our teaching.

Both projects have been inspired in large part by the philosophy that language teaching can be conversation driven, with a focus on real language use. Teachers interested in finding out more about this approach (sometimes referred to as Dogme in English Language Teaching) can do so through the writings of Scott Thornbury.

There is a link to his blog below:

<https://scottthornbury.wordpress.com/>

The following definition of emergent language comes from the Wikipedia page for Dogme in language teaching: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dogme_language_teaching

'Language is considered to emerge in two ways. Firstly classroom activities lead to collaborative communication amongst the students. Secondly, learners produce language that they were not necessarily taught. The teacher's role, in part, is to facilitate the emergence of this language'

On page 37 there are **recommendations for further reading.**

Summary of findings

The report is divided into 4 sections:

1. Interaction in small groups

Our data suggests that the interaction in small group conversations provides a scaffolding to support language learning. Because the groups were often small (3-5 students), learners got more chances to speak around a related topic, which meant they could revise and improve what they said as the conversation progressed. Sometimes they used more complex structures or came out with words more relevant to the discussion. This increased complexity and relevance came about partly because students could recycle parts of each other's utterances but also because **small group conversations give learners time to activate language and formulate utterances which sit at the cutting edge of their capabilities.**

2. Communication breakdowns

This section looks at what happens when students to greater or lesser extent don't understand each other. **Because they are often re-working and reformulating what they say in these situations, they can use more ambitious language. We also found that in trying to repair breakdowns, students employ skilful teaching techniques.**

3. Time

This section uses data from our classrooms to look at the most common verb forms our students are using. It suggests that manipulating the correct form (e.g past tense or present perfect) has very little to do with effective communication. For example, dramatic and involving stories can be told with less than 50% accurate past tense verbs. **One of the main findings in our project was that most of what we are teaching in our syllabuses is not what our students are using - in conversation anyway.**

4. Word patterns and Chunks

Students across the level range build longer speaking turns by using a variety of fixed chunks, (*that's why/ if you/ thinking about*) and longer semi fixed patterns - (*What annoys me aboutis...*). **If we can help our students to process language in patterns, beyond word level, we can not only improve the fluency and complexity of their speaking, but also their ability to process texts more efficiently.**

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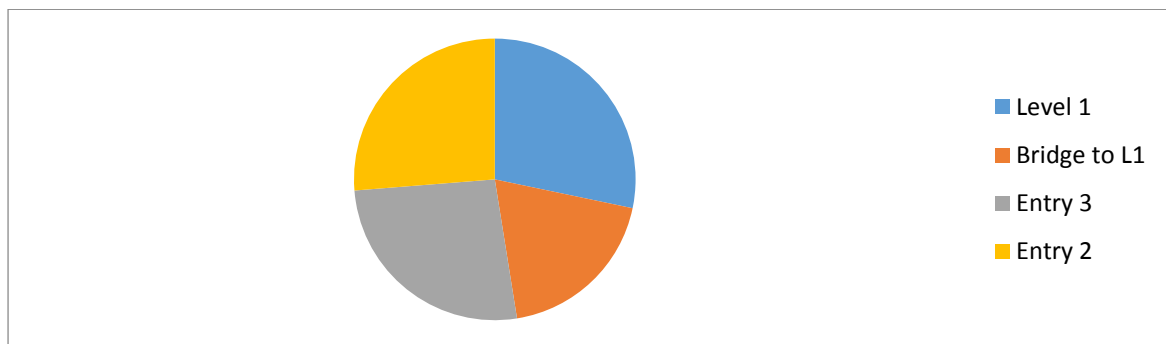
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Project Context

The project took place in the ESOL classes at Tower Hamlets College, east London in the first half of 2015.

In total around 7 hours of classroom conversations were recorded and transcribed. The majority of these conversations took place in small groups within the class. The groups were comprised of 80% +Bangladeshi and Somali students but there were also important contributions from Brazil, Eritrea, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Pakistan and Syria. The majority (80%) of participants were women.

We were able to sample conversations from across the proficiency range, which hopefully makes the findings as relevant as possible and also allowed us to note any changes in language use at different levels



The conversations were set in a range of contexts:

- Incidental chat at the beginning of classes or break time.
- Story telling circles, where students told stories about personal experiences.
- A number of conversations around quality of life for young people and how this has changed compared to when the students were young.
- The organizing of a food sale for charity
- Cards with questions on them, which generated short conversations around topics such as - *Is it OK to borrow money from friends? / What do you like/not like about your home?*
- Discussion of newspaper articles
- Discussion of graded readers

Methods

The learners were recorded speaking in small groups during class time (with their written consent). These recordings were uploaded onto VLC media player for transcribing. Transcription takes about an hour for every 10 minutes of classroom conversation, (depending on the quality of the recording and on how detailed you want the transcript to be). The VLC media player has a 'slow playback' function which helps with the transcription process.

Once classes were transcribed, the researcher met with teachers to discuss the recordings and get background on the learners.

Part of the language analysis was done by compiling a corpus of the transcripts from both projects and downloading them onto a concordancer. This software allows us to search for keywords (similar to an internet search) giving us an insight into word frequencies, collocations and grammar in our learners' conversations. Our Tower Hamlets corpus of ESOL classroom interaction currently contains 45,000 words, which is small compared to other corpora but highly relevant to our teaching context.

For a brief overview of what a corpus is, follow the link below:

<https://21centurytext.wordpress.com/home-2/special-section-window-to-corpus/what-is-corpus/>

A text of any size can be downloaded onto concordancing software. The software from this project is easy to use and can be accessed below:

<http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software.html>

Part 1: Interaction in small groups



Context: Conversational scaffolding



4 students are discussing the differences between communication now and twenty years ago. All students are female. A, C and D are Bengali. B is Somali.

(.) pause = interruption

1. A: the communication is very good now
2. B: very good now but that time (.) long time ago if you wanted to (.) communi (.)speak with
- 3.parent you use you used you use (.)letter
- 4 A: Ok ok ok ok write a letter(.) write the letter
- 5 B: two three months they waiting
- 6 A: I I had the(.) my great grandfather (.) they use micro phone microphone I don't know (...) they
- 7.took and sometimes they write (B: telegram telegram) telegram (C: writing) writing telegram
- 8.telegram writing look at 20 years ago and now (.) completely different
- 9.C: different different
- 10.B: When I when I was (.) When I was young I used to =
11. =D: another thing is money transfer before they send it
12. in the post
- 13.C: now is every shop (.) they take the money(.) everything is change
- 14.D: now is sending to money in a minute wherever in the world
- 15.C: you talk to easily (.) your parents and your country
- 16.D: and=
- 17.B: twenty years ago (.) the communication is (.) was very bad because (.) if you wanted to(.)
- 18.talk and (.) to contact your parent (.) they living in another country you have to use (.) write a
- 19.letter and post and (.) they didn't they didn't get (.) two months

Building a turn

B's contributions give us an insight into how students interact in group work. In her first turn (line 2) she repeats the last 3 words of A's utterance 'very good now' to launch her own turn. This type of repetition is a common strategy used by students to get the floor. **By simply repeating the last part of what the previous speaker has said, they make their contribution more relevant and also give themselves thinking time to construct what they have to say next.** In fact B's next 8 words are just 3 highly automated chunks of language: 'that time' 'long time ago' 'if you':

A: the communication is very good now

*B: very good now but **that time** (.) **long time ago** if you wanted to (.) communi (.)speak with parent you use you used you use (.)letter*

Chunks like this are sometimes called fluency builders because they are easily remembered and give students the time to elaborate the rest of what they have to say⁰.

Peer teaching

In response, A repeats (and reformulates) the last part of B's utterance

B: you used you use (.) letter

*A: Ok ok ok ok **write a letter** (.) **write the letter***

A agrees with what B has just said and at the same time very conversationally and unobtrusively corrects her (use a letter -> write a letter). **Our data shows students in group conversations often skilfully correct each other in this way.**

B returns the favour to A as she struggles in line 6 and 7 to search for a word 'telegram'.

Grabbing a turn

The conversation is not always collaborative and students have to be quite assertive to grab a turn. In line 11, D barges into the action, interrupting B with 'another thing is' changing the topic to money transfers.

B: When I when I was (.) When I was young I used to =

*=D: **another thing is** money transfer before they send in the post*

'Another thing is' is a very useful 'turn grabber' or 'topic changer' in a conversation. Collectively students have a repertoire of these fixed phrases, which they use in similar ways. These repertoires are probably worth collecting in our classes and building on for the benefit of other learners.

Conversation gives students time to improve

'B' is excluded from the conversation for the next few turns but comes back in (lines 17 to 19) with an elaboration of what she started in line 2. If we take a closer look at this elaboration, we can see a number of improvements, which come about in part because she has used what the others have said previously but mostly because **speaking in small groups means you often get a second chance to reformulate and improve on what you originally said.**

First turn

B: very good now but that time (.) long time ago if you wanted to (.) communi (.) speak with parent you use you used you use (.) letter.....two three months they waiting

Later turn

B: twenty years ago (.) the communication is (.) was very bad because (.) if you wanted to (.) talk and (.) to contact your parent (.) they living in another country you have to use (.) write a letter and post and (.) they didn't they didn't get (.) two months

first turn	later turn	improvements?
that time a long time ago	twenty years ago	Picking up and using what A said in line 8.
	communication is, was very bad	She makes her second (longer) turn more coherent by introducing what she is about to say.
wanted to speak with parent	wanted to talk and to contact your parent they living another country	More expansive. Is there also an emerging relative clause after 'parent'?
you use letter –	you have to use (.) write a letter	She includes the correction from A in line 2, also a more complex verb phrase 'have to write'
two three months they waiting	they didn't get two months	In the first turn she grabs the floor with a nicely emphatic, " <i>two three months they waiting</i> ," fronting the time adverbial ¹ . She says the same thing in the later turn, perhaps less emphatically but situating it in the past - 'didn't get two months'

Context: Holding a speaking turn without getting interrupted



Five students in Bridge to Level 1 class are organizing a food sale, which will take place in the atrium of the college. It is a frenetic discussion with lots of overlapping and interrupting as they come up with ideas. This type of fast-paced interaction was quite common in group discussions. Of the 200 turns only 9 extend to more than 30 seconds. One student, Busad, holds 7 of these 9 turns. She is the most proficient speaker but it is not just her proficiency that allows her to dominate, she has strategies to **get the floor** and **hold a turn**. Here are 3 extracts from her longer turns:

(.) = a pause. The stressed words are written larger.

1. we ask we **ask** people now (.) we **ask** the canteen people to **help** us (.) because we **have to** negotiate with them **first** (.) because (.) we **are** taking their place because (.) and the **cost** as well **because** (.) they are the people who provide (.) everyday **lunch**

2. ok.. how can **we** (.) .. do the fundraising **so** (.) **first** (.) everybody has to have a **budget** so if I say I have **budget** for twenty **pound** (S5: yeah) **so** (.) I would use twenty pounds to **buy** (.) what I **need**

3. we **need** (1) cutleries we **need** (1) water we **need** umm (1) something to do with.....

She **holds the floor** by emphasizing and pausing after a discourse marker, (so, because, first) after modals (have to) and transitive verbs, which are verbs that are incomplete without an object (need, buy). By placing great emphasis and pausing on these words, **she focuses the listener on what she is going to say next, which makes her less vulnerable to interruption.**

In the first extract (1) she **gets the floor** by repeating the first verb 'ask' and uses this as a springboard into a more complex utterance. (ask the canteen people to help).

Here we can see another student using a similar strategy to get the floor.

(students are discussing cyber bullying in school)

4. **protest** **protest** student who is doing this wrong thing(.) maybe (parents) can **protest** (.)

One of the reasons why Busad can hold longer turns is that she **speaks first and thinks later**, she also pauses and emphasizes words that show she has not finished what she has to say. Moriom (S5:below) is the opposite, thinking **before** she speaks, which means she pauses at 'sentence' boundaries, where her turn could be considered complete and so she often gets interrupted:

[interruption (.) pause

Context: Families in social housing being moved out of central London

S1: *we can't manage quickly our life at new place*

S5: *London has got lots of facilities (.) [and ever*

S1: *[and it's it's it's will upset (.) the mental health as well*

Context: discussing a newspaper article

S1: *yeah (reading) doctor are doctor are prescribing too many (s3: antibiotics) antibiotics to patients*

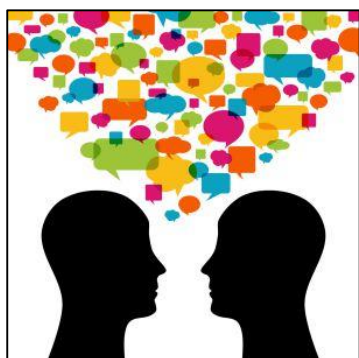
S5: *too many antibiotics (.) [if you*

S1: *[no they didn't give too many....*

Implications for the classroom

- It seems that some Bengali and Somali students have 'high involvement' conversational styles^{1b}, which means that speakers often finish each other's sentences, overlap and interrupt as a way of agreeing and showing solidarity. However, such interaction patterns can mean there is little time for the more hesitant speakers to build a turn.
- We can encourage more hesitant learners **not** to pause for thinking time at sentence boundaries but instead **after** an emphasized conjunction:²
we have to negotiate with them first (.) because (.) we are taking their place
- It might be useful for more hesitant learners to know that a turn does not have to be well formed from the beginning and that meaning can develop as the turn progresses.
protest protest student who is doing this wrong thing (.) maybe (parents) can protest
- When we comment on learners' **use of conjunctions** it might be useful for them to know how these grammar words can play a role in holding longer turns^{2b}. Turn holding could also be a useful context to introduce learners to the concept of **transitive verbs**. (verbs that are incomplete without an object)
I would use twenty pounds to buy(.) what I need

Context: Helping each other elaborate



This extract comes from the beginning of a discussion about 'life now compared to twenty years ago' and ideas on the topic are beginning to emerge. **B takes the role of questioner** - checking she has heard A (line 3) and asking her to clarify (line 7) and expand (line 9).

From our data, **such questioning is relatively rare in group discussions but here it mostly has the effect of pushing A into longer and more elaborate turns.** However too much questioning can be overpowering, especially if it is not always sensitive to what the other student is saying.

(.) pause and length of pause in seconds (....) unclear

1.A: my opinion is (.) compared to twenty years (.) because life now is (.) easier (.) because the

2.technology (.) faster

3.B: sorry what did you say?

4.A: yeah because (1) twenty years (.) compared to the now (.) nowadays life um (.) become better

5.(B: why do you think?) because the technology become come faster?(.)lots of um (2) technology

6.also um (1) travel (1) um (1) education

7.B: what do you mean about travel?

8.A: travel like the lots of uh (.) changing in (1) our life

9.B: give us example

10.A: example like (.) they make the new DLR (1) um make the new station like before they not more

11.train station (.) in in um(2) in UK(.) now more build a building transport umm (3) (.....) and (1)

12.make the education curriculum change (2) lots of thing (....) and children and so homework like

13.they (.) can find the internet (1) they can easier their life the homework (.)

Implications for the classroom

Can we teach students how to take up 'activating' roles in conversations, for example as a questioner or summarizer? At E3 level and above it seems that such interaction can drive more expansive student turns and is **a nice way to counter-balance a high involvement, overlapping conversation style, where more hesitant speakers can get interrupted** (see previous chapter)

Emerging patterns

So we could say that B's questions push A to expand further. She starts her longest turn (line 10) by repeating quite simple verb + noun collocations to build her turn:

'make the new DLR', 'make the new station' 'build buildings'

to potentially more complex verb patterns:

'make the education curriculum change' 'they can easier the life' (make their life easier)

We can help students realise that the verbs they are already familiar with (in this case 'make') can sit in longer patterns that form the basis of concepts they are trying to express (in this case - *internet can **make** life **easier** for children*) – [The internet 'causes' life to be easier for children].

This pattern **make + noun + adjective** seems to emerge at around Entry 3 level in our data. Here are some more examples:

*This is a long story, I **make** it **short** (E2)*

*When I enter my home, when I saw it my plant, it **makes** me **happy** (E3)*

*Children are not bad but person **make** them **bad** (E3)*

*Make one thing (food) that **makes** you **happy** (L1)*

*We can use the Learning Zone (...) it easier our life (**makes** our life **easier**) (L1)*

*Technology make easy people (**makes** things **easy** for people) (L1)*

Implications for the classroom

By all accounts, the students have not been taught this verb pattern (make + noun + adjective) but instead it seems to be emerging through use. Would our teaching be more effective if we could recognise and work with this student-led grammar syllabus rather than implanting our own?

Context: if clauses

Student's use 'if' clauses as frames around which they can extend their utterances and so get more speaking time. In this sense the 'if' sequence is an important tool for constructing turns and building fluency.

*(talking about kids causing problems in her building) If you, if you tell the police **then** they trouble you, if you don't say anything, you are safe*

*(conversation about children and technology) if you have internet **then you can** search whatever you want*

The 2 examples above are fairly typical of how our students use 'if clauses':

- The **If** clause is almost always the first one,
- **If** clauses often combine with '**can**' or '**then**' in the main clause.
- '**If you**' makes up over half the examples our students are using. As a chunk of language, it is readily available and is often repeated as they build a turn.
- Students commonly use '**if**' to warn or give advice or to support a statement with an example. This example is often introduced with '**if you**'

Warnings and advice: (first extract is from a conversation about children and technology)

1. *If you Facebook chatting , different person can come*
2. *(discussion about taking young children shopping) If you go food shopping they have many foods on display ,children might be eat from there , be careful*

To support a point with an example:

3. *(discussion about whether celebrities are overpaid) Celebrities earn a lot of money even when they are just walking singing or acting , for example , if you are dying , you can't go to a celebrity*
4. *(chat about houses) the view is very nice in my mother-in-law's bedroom , if you um look out the window, you see Canary Wharf*

There are over 200 examples of 'if' clauses in our classroom data. They occur through all proficiency levels. There is **just 1 example** of what we know as the 'first conditional' (*if + present tense + will*) and 2 examples (*if + present tense + gonna*). There are no examples of 2nd or 3rd conditionals and 'if' occurs with 'would' on 2 occasions.

As we can see, students are using 'if' clauses for quite specific functions (warn, exemplify etc). What are the other language features of these functions, that we can teach alongside what they already use (if clauses)?

Part 2: communication breakdowns and repair



Alamy B71G6F

Context: A student wants her classmate to bring back some sweets from Turkey



This extract comes from some chat before the beginning of the class. A is a Brazilian student trying to explain a certain type of sweet shop to B, a Bulgarian who used to live in Turkey.

- 1.A: you bring some sweets for me (.) back? I like sweets that (.) shops (.) that you choose some (.)
- 2.you know?
- 3.B: which shop?
- 4.A: do you know that shop have a lot sweet you say I want this this this
- 5.B: you take it
- 6.A: I give you money (.) I pay you (.) I wish that (.) because the box no really (.) understand or no
- 7.no?
- 8.B: what type of sweets?
- 9.A: remember you bring to me the box (.) the box (.) I ask if you (.) when you go (.) if you can
- 10.bring that (.) you know that shop have a lot of sweets you choose
- 11.B I brought you before I
- 12.A: you bought (.)that box
- 13.B: but I don't know a lot of sweets. Turkish a lot of sweets they have (.) can you remember I
- 14.don't know this Turkish food.
- 15.A: yes but you bought that ah (.) box box do you know (.) do you know some shops that all
- 16.street have for tourists (.) that you can choose which sweets you (.) buy (.) phew! much much
- 17.much better because is a(.) like fresh is like no no industrial you understand (.) do you know
- 18.what is artisanal make by (.) you like your mother make something at home understand? much
- 19.better than when you buy

Stretching herself.....

'A' needs to go to great lengths to explain to 'B' the type of sweet shop she wants him to go to. We could say that in conversational terms, non-understanding is seen as something negative but here it has a positive effect, stretching A to the limits of her linguistic capabilities. For example, her requests become more elaborate:

(line 1) *you bring some sweets for me* → **(line 9)** *I ask if you (.) when you go (.) if you can bring that*

Her final turn, the long and complex request in lines 15 – 19 would not have been possible (or necessary) at the beginning of the conversation. This length and complexity is built up with each failed attempt to describe the sweet shop. We can see this in how the noun phrase for 'shop' expands through the exchange:

(line 1) *shops that you choose some*

(line 4) *that shop that have a lot of sweet you say I want this this this*

(lines 15+16) *some shops that all street have for tourists that you can choose which sweets you buy*

The more she talks about the sweet shop, the more she is reminded of how nice the sweets are (*phew! much much much better!*) so she attempts to describe them, finishing with a complex '*much better than when you buy*':

(lines 18+19) *do you know what is artisanal* make by (.) you like your mother make something at home understand much better than when you buy

Implications for the classroom

It is interesting that the learner elaborations in the extract above come about because there is a real need for communication and the speaking is not just at the service of 'practicing English'. It has been argued that when conversation is *least* focused on learning, then the *most* language learning (or development) takes place³.

It is also worth noting that students do not need big discussion topics to stretch themselves, and it is often in the incidental chat at break times or before the class begins, when they are really trying to get a message across. **Instead of ploughing on with a lesson plan, can we draw the lesson out of these informal conversations?**

Context: Cooperative repair - what students do when they don't understand each other



Usually if a student does not understand, she lets it go and waits to see if the context resolves it later (as she would do in her first language). This is especially the case at lower levels, where students are acutely aware that any repair sequence could be long and laborious. If they have to interrupt, they do it as cooperatively as they can, perhaps repeating the unknown word, with a rising intonation, as if they have misheard it⁴:

(conversation about immigrants getting work)

S2: my brother came in Londonhe has a educated BA honours pass (.) but now he is doing in grill work (.) grill worker

S3: grill worker?

S2: yeah fried chicken shop

S3: ohh fried chicken

The problem is often resolved by one student providing a less specific word, in the example above S2 uses 'fried chicken shop'. The exchange below follows a similar sequence, S2 repeats what she thought she understood ('country, what country?') helping S2 provide the repair:

(chat at beginning the class, S4 is asking S3 about job opportunities where he works)

S3: if you speak very well English ...they like you maybe you have chance to ah (2) apply for..... or apply for porter working porter or you apply for pantry

S4: country what country?

S3: eh sorry (.) pantry pan=

=S4: pantry what is this?

S3: kitch, like coffee (S4: ok) is small restaurant there

S4: OK

In the example below, S5 repeats the part of the question she understood, with a rising intonation, **(what did you do?)** which focuses S6 on the second part that was not understood **(at the weekend)**.

(chat at beginning of a class)

(.) pause

S6: what did you do at the weekend?

S5: what did you do?

S6: what did you do (.) at the weekend

S5: last weekend?

S6: yeah last weekend

Because S5 has guided S6 to the problem source, S6 is now able to pause before the part that was misunderstood and say it more clearly. **(what did you do (.) at the weekend)**

Implications for the classroom

In the above examples, the listener is helping out the speaker as much as she can, rather than just signalling that she doesn't understand. These cooperative repair sequences have been noted as successful strategies in job interviews, where the interviewee speaking in her second language, repeats back what she thought she understood to guide the interviewer to where communication has broken down⁵.

We often encourage students to signal when they don't understand each other but can we also be modelling strategies?

Context: Peer teachers

In this example an Eritrean student (S2), doesn't realise she has misunderstood the question "How many hours should children go to school each day?" and others in the group (Bangladeshi) help her out.

(.) pause

S3: question is how (.)many hours (.) should children go to school each day? (.) Why?

S2: Oh I think children should go to school fifteen minute to ten minute from where they (.) that's what I believe

S1: only fifteen minutes?

S2: yes that's for children (.)or it will be too far (.) for example like my son is six and a half (.) if have bring him every morning

*S3: **not not this question not for the (.)travelling (.) this is inside the school (.) inside the school how long they stay in the class***

S3's repair (in red) first focuses on the misunderstanding : that 'go to school' does not mean 'travel' and then provides 2 examples to illustrate the real meaning 'inside the school / how long they stay in class'.

In the example below, it seems that S4 has misunderstood the question as 'Do you like your home?'

S1: what do you like most about your home?

S4: I like I like my home because uh this is uh (.) this area is nice and uh I lived in (.)second floor

*S1: but **which one specifically** you have to say **which thing** you liked (.) **the most***

S4: mm most I like my sitting room because this is large room.....

Again, the student skilfully focuses in on the problem area, rephrasing the question twice 'which one specifically /which thing you liked' before repeating the original part of the question 'the most'

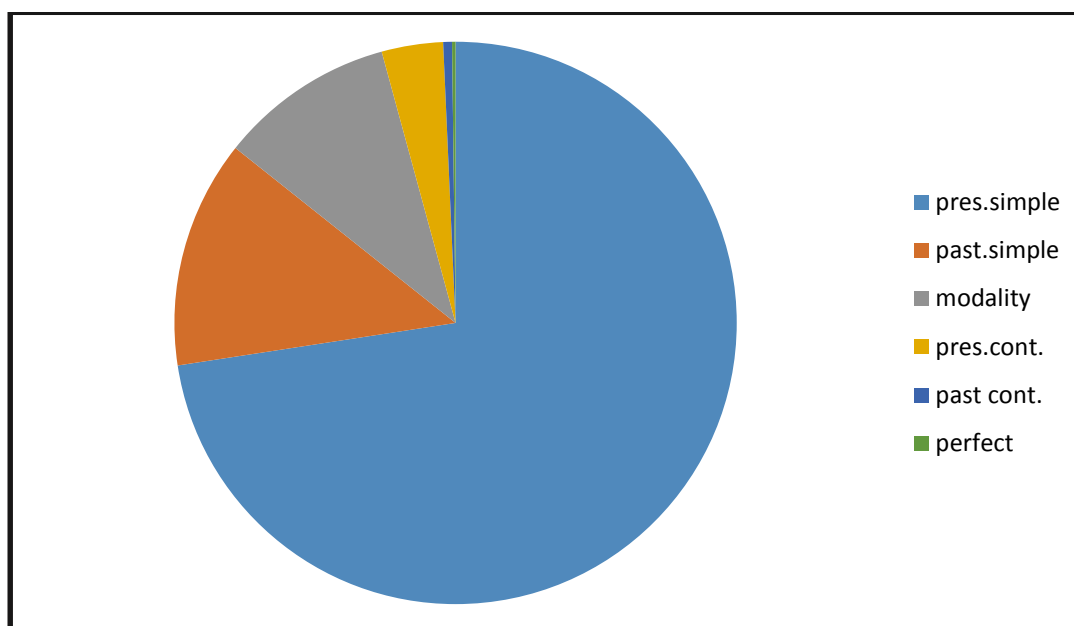
Implications for the classroom

As we already know, some students are skilled teachers and this is a role they often willingly take up in group work. It could be worth listening closely to the more successful methods of repair (like the extracts above), breaking down why they are successful, then using them as models for other students.

Part 3: Time



Verb forms our students are using



72% present simple. The present simple makes up the majority of verb forms but this has little to do with our students over using it. Much larger databases of conversation show similar results, the present simple is just very versatile ⁶

13% past simple. When students refer to past time in conversation, they often use adverbial + *present tense verb* (e.g. *last Saturday I go to park*). Our data contains a lot of stories but when students tell stories they don't 'correctly' use past tense verbs about 50% of the time. Time adverbials do the job of situating and sequencing the story, which usually makes the past tense verb form redundant. Students often use dialogue in their stories ('he said.....then I said) to add drama, which also obviates the need for past tense verb forms.

10% modal verbs 'Can' is by far the most common modal verb (51%) **2.have to** (19%) **3.will** (9%) **4. should** (8%) **5.gonna/going to** (5%) **6. need to/must** (4%) **7. could/would/might/may** (combined - less than 4%)

3.5% present continuous (0.5% past continuous) . Our students are perhaps over using the continuous verb form. Maybe because at the most basic level it is the 'ing' form that is the first to emerge from a repertoire that contains mostly nouns⁷. In our data, the verb 'to be' is omitted from continuous forms about 50% of the time.

0.2% present perfect (simple and continuous). In spite of the amount of time dedicated to 'teaching' and 'practicing' the present perfect verb form at Entry 3 + levels, our students don't seem to be using it (in conversation anyway). However, this has little to do with our students *under* using it. Much larger conversation databases of native/proficient speakers show that the perfect aspect makes up less than 5% of verb forms.⁸

Context: Student tells the story of an injured bird in a busy road



The class have been telling stories and most of the students have talked about personal histories of moving to and settling in London but the most interesting stories were about recent events. Mohammed comes in one day with a story about an injured bird in the street. Because the story is a recent one, there is an enthusiasm and urgency in the telling.

The pace of the story increases in the middle section as Mohammed uses 'then' to drive the story forward⁹. (time is marked in red). The drama in the story is maintained by Mohammed reporting his thoughts throughout (marked in purple)

The story is expertly told, he sets the scene: the bus stop, the injured bird , the traffic:

Last Sunday I was stay on the bus stop and waited for bus in this time I saw one bird on the street the bird didn't fly because I think is injured I wanted to help them (it) but bird is in another side of street not the my track, this is difficult to over the street, cross the street, is come a lot of car in the way,

What follows is the main event of the story – The situation is getting desperate as cars are trying to avoid the bird. Mohammed can't decide what to do:

then come some bus, no go to drive over the bird , the bus going to kerb, then I thinking I do needed something no? nobody come then I decide to go on the spot then when I decided to go over the track this time came another two people to try to get off get off from this street but the bird is injured, no move, no move then this people pick up the bird put in the side in the garden

Finally Mohammed looks back at the incident and seems to regret taking too long:

then after five minutes come my bus and go away then I thinking is too late for me to help the little bird

Our students' use of the past tense

Mohammed's story is a nice example of how our students use (or don't use) past tense when referring to past time.

Past verbs **marked in red**, present tense **marked in blue**

Orientation: sets the scene

*Last Sunday I **was** stay on the bus stop and **waited** for bus, in this time I **saw** one bird on the street, the bird **didn't fly** because I **think is** injured. I **wanted** to help them (it) but bird **is** in another side of street, not the my track, this **is** difficult to over the street, cross the street, **is come** a lot of car in the way.*

Main events

*then **come** some bus, **no go** to drive over the bird , the bus **going to** kerb, then I **thinking** I do **needed** something no? nobody **come** then I **decide** to go on the spot then when I **decided** to go over the track this time **came** another two people ,**try** to get off get off from this street but the bird **is** injured, **no move, no move** then this people **pick up** the bird **put** in the side in the garden*

Coda: looking back

*then after five minutes **come** my bus and **go** away then I **thinking is** too late for me to help the little bird.*

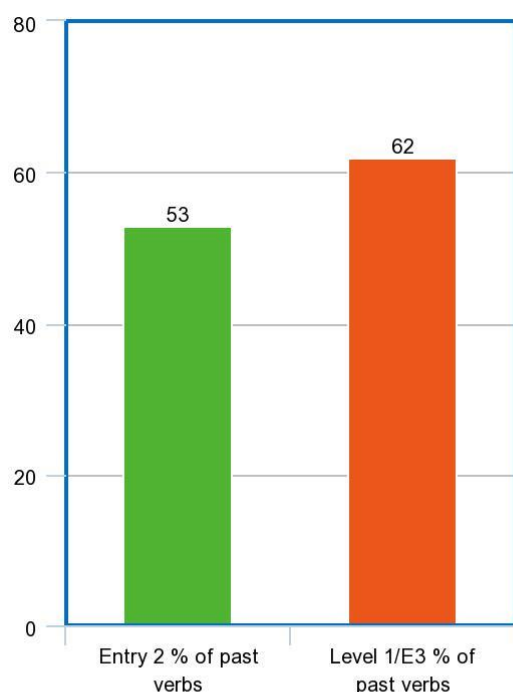
There are 28 verb phrases in the text. **8 are in the past tense. 20 in the present.**

Mohammed sets the scene using time adverbials and **past tense verbs** (**this time I saw one bird**). Then the events of the story take over and Mohammed stops using past verbs, partly because he is too involved in the story but also because the listener is already situated in the past and there is little need for the past tense.

In conversation, for shorter turns, where a full context has often not been established, students often rely on time adverbials, rather than verbs do the job of marking time:

*" twenty years ago, we **can talk** to people back home easily"*

Mohammed is an Entry 2 student and his past tense verb use is fairly typical: At Entry 2 students 'correctly' use a past verb around 50% of the time. But interestingly at Entry 3/ Level 1 this increases to only around 60%.



Percentage of verbs used in the past to refer to past time

meta-chart.com

Implications for the classroom

It seems that students quite quickly learn the most important past verbs and then 'plateau'. This perhaps shows that **effective communication has little to do with (consistently) using the correct verb form**. For example, there are a number of other factors in Mohammed's story, aside from the past tense, that we can model as useful features of a narrative:

- effective staging (introduction, main events and reflection)^{9b}
- lexis to paint the picture (*bus stop, injured bird, cross the street, drive over, kerb, pick up*)
- time adverbials to sequence the story (*this time, then, after 5 minutes*)
- place adverbials to situate the story (*on the street, another side of the street, my track*)
- determiners to keep track of repeated appearances of people and things, (*one bird, the bird, another 2 people, this people*)
- verbs to communicate the thoughts and feelings of characters in the story (*I thinking / I wanted to / I decide to...*)

Emerging grammar in Mohammed's story

Mohammed's story is centred around his deciding whether to rescue the bird and the difficulty in doing this. He conveys concepts of **difficulty** and **decision making** in the infinitive patterns he uses:

to refer to decisions and intentions	to refer to difficulty
<i>I wanted to help</i>	<i>difficult to cross the street</i>
<i>I decide to go to the spot</i>	<i>two people try to get off the bird</i>
<i>I decide to go over the track</i>	<i>too late for me to help the little bird</i>

As we can see, Mohammed is already using infinitive complements and there are other times in the story where he **almost** uses them.

*then come some bus no go to drive over the bird (some bus **try not to** drive over the bird)*

*then I thinking I do needed something no? (I **needed to do** something, no?)*

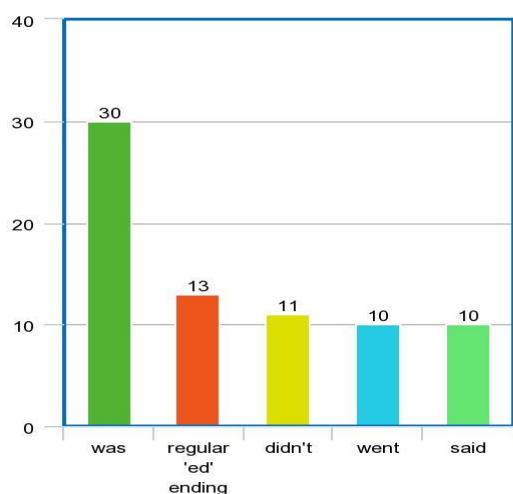
Implications for the classroom

We can introduce students to grammar patterns by:

- **Priming them to notice these grammar patterns in the texts these patterns most often appear in:** For example, we will see lots of 'infinitive compliments' in texts about 'decision making, planning, trying and failing'.
- **Breaking these grammar concepts out of the language they are already using.** Mohammed could be introduced to other words and patterns that also use the infinitive in this way:

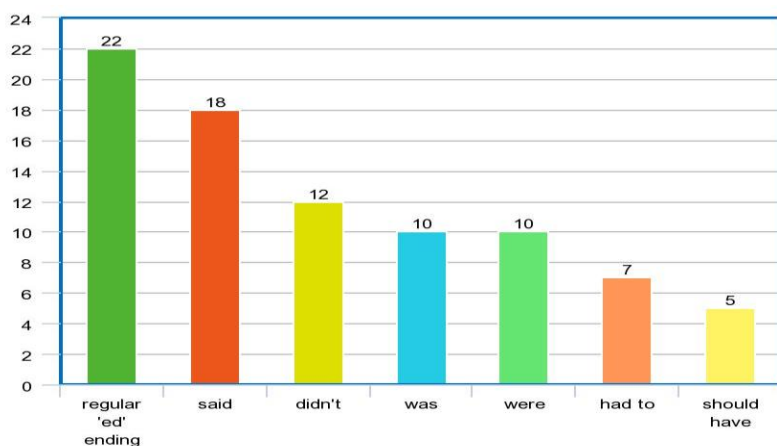
to refer to decisions and intentions	to refer to difficulty
<i>arrange/hope/plan/promise etc....</i>	<i>adj: hard/easy/ (un) able/ (im)possible/</i> <i>verbs: manage/try</i> <i>patterns: too + adjective + to do</i>

What past tense verbs do students omit or not use 'correctly'?



Verbs not used in past tense at E2

meta-chart.com



Verbs not used in past tense at E3/L1

meta-chart.com

Students are not consistently using these past tense verbs perhaps because they are often not stressed in speech, so learners don't hear them. Leaving out these verbs or using the present tense equivalent (is/was, don't/didn't) is hardly noticed (except by English teachers!). Interestingly, it's roughly the same verbs at Entry 2 as at Level 1. Some points to note:

- Regular 'ed' endings are most often omitted. This ties in with data on second language acquisition, where regular past tense verb endings are the last to be acquired¹⁰.
- Higher level learners seem to have better control of 'was'. (Interestingly 'were' almost doesn't exist at Entry 2)
- Even at higher levels '**didn't**' is 'avoided/forgotten' about 50% of the time (*he no understand/he don't have*)
- Our data suggests that using modality in the past (had to/ should have) is something our higher level learners struggle with.

Part 4: Word patterns and chunks



Have



A group of Level 1 students are discussing the statement:

Life has become better for young people compared to twenty years ago

'Have' is the most frequent verb in the conversation. What are the different patterns these students are using with 'have'?

- (only) 1 example of **present perfect** – '*children have become less religious*' – consistent with the rest of our data, in that students use this verb form very rarely in conversation.
- 6 examples of '**have to**' – '*people feel they have to buy a computer/ you have to control your children*' which reflects the obligations some students feel that modern life has imposed on them.
- 7 examples of '**have + noun**' to talk about possession and what modern life has given us '*have smartphones/internet/Ideas Store/information/knowledge*'
- But the emerging and most common patterns (13 examples) are extensions of the have for 'possession'
children have more chance to improve
we have more opportunity ESOL class
they have no time to visit their family

Implications for the classroom

These students are beginning to extend their language beyond the basic 'have + noun' collocation. We can see them processing language in longer 'chains':

have + time /opportunity / chance/ money to do something .

Can we be helping our students move beyond the most basic patterns, as these students are starting to do?

Think...



A small group of students are preparing for a charity food sale and each is discussing what they will bring:

(.) pause

*S1: If I say I make (.) **I was thinking** to make lasagne (.) I have a nice lasagne*

*S2: **I thinking** to make (.) chickpeas*

'I was thinking' is a lovely way of gently making a suggestion, the past tense 'was' makes the suggestion more tentative and S2 reuses the phrase for her own suggestion. **This is a nice example of conversational scaffolding in group work, where the conversation allows the language of a more proficient speaker to become the frame on to which others can build their utterances.**

Sometimes 'I (was) thinking' is used as part of a commentary to a story, to involve the listener more. As a phrase, it is processed as one unit, in this way it gives students thinking time to construct the rest of their story:

*(a student finds an iPhone in the toilets)and **I was thinking** what do I have to do with this phone?*

*(a student sees an injured bird in the road) so **I thinking** is too late for me to help this little bird*

*(a mini cab driver gets a puncture) I call my firm and they say...we are so far.... can you wait another two hours and **I am thinking** for changing tyre is first time in my life..... I don't know how to change tyre*

As you can see, the commentating function of 'I (am/was) thinking' means that it is used at important intersections in the telling and often occurs after conjunctions (and, so, but)

In a discussion about 'limiting children's use of smartphones' , '**think**' forms the basis of a pattern: ***I think + person + modal verb.***

*I think teacher **no need** to do this (keep children in detention for using phones)*

*I think the school **should** take responsibility (teacher says this)*

*I think kids **should** just in school use internet no smartphone*

*I think you **can** do something about other children*

*I think you **need** better rules (teacher says this)*

Implications for the classroom

Modal verbs occur in this frame because we often need to soften our opinions about what *other people* are doing (or not doing). Instead of teaching individual modals, could we teach this concept of modality through the pattern? ***I think + person + modal verb***

ABOUT.....

'**about**' is the 2nd most common preposition in this discussion, the students were using it after words of thinking and communication:

*Ok we **have a conversation about** should we limit smartphone use in school*

*I (feel) **positive about** this*

*I very **worried about** what happened my son or daughter*

*Morim can you **say something about** this?*

*I am **very unhappy about** (teachers says this)*

*Do you **have opinions about** this?*

*We can **talk to** the children **about** this*

Implications for the classroom

If we can introduce lexis - preposition first (in this case 'about')- this will generate nice words and collocations around a function - in this case **expressing opinions and feelings**. Also, if new lexis is anchored around its preposition, perhaps this preposition is less likely to be left out in future.

Lexical Frames.....



Students are discussing the question "What annoys you about where you live". S1 and the teacher have been talking about S1's possible eviction. S2 manages to come in on the conversation and change the topic:

= (interruption) (.) pause

S1: maybe there is another, another client is lots of rent (S3: higher) higher

T: ah OK they want (S1: rent higher yeah) to put the rent higher. Ok yeah

S1: we can't any any houses in this area

S2: What annoys in my area=

= S1: now is every landlord.

S2: **what annoys** me in my area people **is that** there is like (.) teenager smokes in downstairs so every night

She has used the first part of the question on the card "What **annoys you about** where you live?' but just changed the pronoun to 'me'. This gets the attention of the others and refocuses the conversation.

This structure (*what annoys me + noun phrase + is that*) is actually a very generative frame with slots that can be varied depending on what you want to complain about:

Frame	slot	frame	slot
<i>What annoys me</i>	<i>in my area</i>	<i>is that</i>	<i>teenager smoke downstairs every night</i>
	<i>about my building</i>		
	<i>about my mother-in-law</i>		
	<i>about this college</i>		
	<i>about London</i>		

Implications for the classroom

Fluency is quite an elusive concept to pin down but it has been suggested that lexical frames like the ones above contribute to an impression of fluency because they can help learners:

- announce the topic
- focus the attention of the listener
- allow them time to elaborate the next part of the utterance.¹¹

The frame could be tweaked to 'announce' a range of opinions :

Frame	slot	frame	slot	frame	slot
<i>What I</i>	<i>love</i> <i>hate</i> <i>don't like</i> <i>find funny</i> <i>enjoy</i>	<i>about</i>		<i>is</i>	

More frames.....



If we can help students to process language beyond the word level and to see the potentials of **frames and slots**, we are helping them to see and use the language in bigger units¹². This helps them to not only build their spoken fluency but also to manage more complex texts, read more quickly and perhaps keep up with faster paced conversation as well.

Here are some more frames that are emerging in our student's spoken repertoires. They occur across all proficiency levels but more often at E3 and above. **If we are tuned into hearing our students use these frames (or almost use them), they can become very accessible language models for other learners to experiment with.**

bold – frame **red** - slot

- that's a nice thing – (**the nice thing is - the great/sad/funny thing is.....**)
- [children these days] have **not only college time and school time, they can** go after school club so many things they can do
- **not just technology, you can** speak about something else
- ESOL classes are **not only for learning but also for meeting people**

- they (teenagers in my building) have no manners. I don't have any trouble but I **just hate to see it** ≠ (**just love to see it**)
- people are **just so busy** (**just so + adjective**)
- I am feeling like exhausted but she **just wanna talk** (**just wanna + verb**) *often used to complain*

- S1: parents are very worried about what happen son or daughter but daughter (can) phone mum S2; **(which) is a positive thing**
- but children have busy life busy busy busy more busy, you can't stop them **which is worse**
[**which is/was + adjective (which is great/terrible/fantastic etc)** - a very generative frame that we use to tag on an evaluative comment at the end of an utterance],¹³ which is great!

Conclusions...

Interaction

- **Why is talking in small groups important for language learning?** Our data suggests that the interaction patterns in small group conversations provide a scaffolding through which students can activate dormant words and build complexity in what they want to say.
- **Are the conversation styles that our students import from their cultures, beneficial for language learning?** For example, it seems that some of our Somali and Bengali students show solidarity and agreement by speaking in overlapping turns, often interrupting and finishing each other's utterances.
- **Can we be modelling 'turn getting' and 'turn holding' strategies for our quieter or more hesitant students?** For example, using fixed phrases to interrupt, pausing after (and not before) conjunctions and placing emphasis on these discourse markers.
- **Can we make our students more aware of the different ways of dealing with misunderstanding?** 'Letting something go' is a strategy we all use when we don't understand and getting clarification is often a cooperative exercise, where the listener guides the speaker to where the misunderstanding lies.
- **Instead of ploughing on with lesson plans, can we draw the lesson out of informal conversations that are buzzing around in small groups at the beginning of a class?** Students do not need big discussion topics to stretch themselves, and it is often during the incidental chat at break times or before the class begins, when the 'topics' most relevant to them can emerge.

Language

- **Can we be working with and expanding the language that students are already using, rather than teaching words and grammar we think they ought to be using?** The text book grammar syllabus, which we import from EFL, is not based on evidence of how languages are used and learned in the real world¹⁴. This is born out in the rarity of these grammar structures in our students' spoken repertoires
- **Can we adapt the vocabulary activities we already use for practicing lexical chunks?**¹⁵ Seeing words in patterns of fixed chunks and semi fixed chunks of frames and slots can help students to produce and process language more efficiently.
- **Can we focus on how some 'grammar sequences' can help learners construct longer speaking turns?** For example, 'If' clauses are useful fluency builders, and frames such as '*not only ..but also*' help our learners hold more expansive speaking turns.
- **When a student comes out with a short anecdote or story, what is good about it and how can we improve it?** This does not mean focusing on verb forms. For example, our data shows that consistent and accurate use of past tense verbs is way down the list of what makes a good story

Thanks

I am extremely grateful to all the teachers who allowed me to watch their classes and who shared their knowledge with me and to the students who gave permission for their classes to be recorded.

Photos on title pages and at the start of each section were taken in Connemara, Ireland - courtesy of Anne Marie Gallen.

Richard Gallen – teacher – Tower Hamlets College – June 2015

Further reading

For an introduction to conversation-driven, materials light, language teaching:

Teaching Unplugged. Scott Thornbury and Luke Meddings, DELTA Publishing (2008)

For an introduction to conversation analysis:

Conversation Analysis and Second Language Pedagogy: A Guide for ESL/EFL Teachers. Jean Wong and Hansun Zhang Waring, New York (2010)

For an introduction to emerging language:

Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics. Diane Larsen-Freeman, Lynne Cameron, Oxford University Press (2008)

Grammar books which focus on a lexical approach to working with language:

Implementing the Lexical Approach: Putting Theory into Practice. Michael Lewis (1997) Hove UK: Language Teaching

'Natural Grammar'. Scott Thornbury. Oxford University Press; (2004)

For an introduction to using Corpora for language teaching:

From Corpus to Classroom: Language Use and Language Teaching. Anne O'Keeffe, Michael McCarthy and Ronald Carter. Cambridge (2003)

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