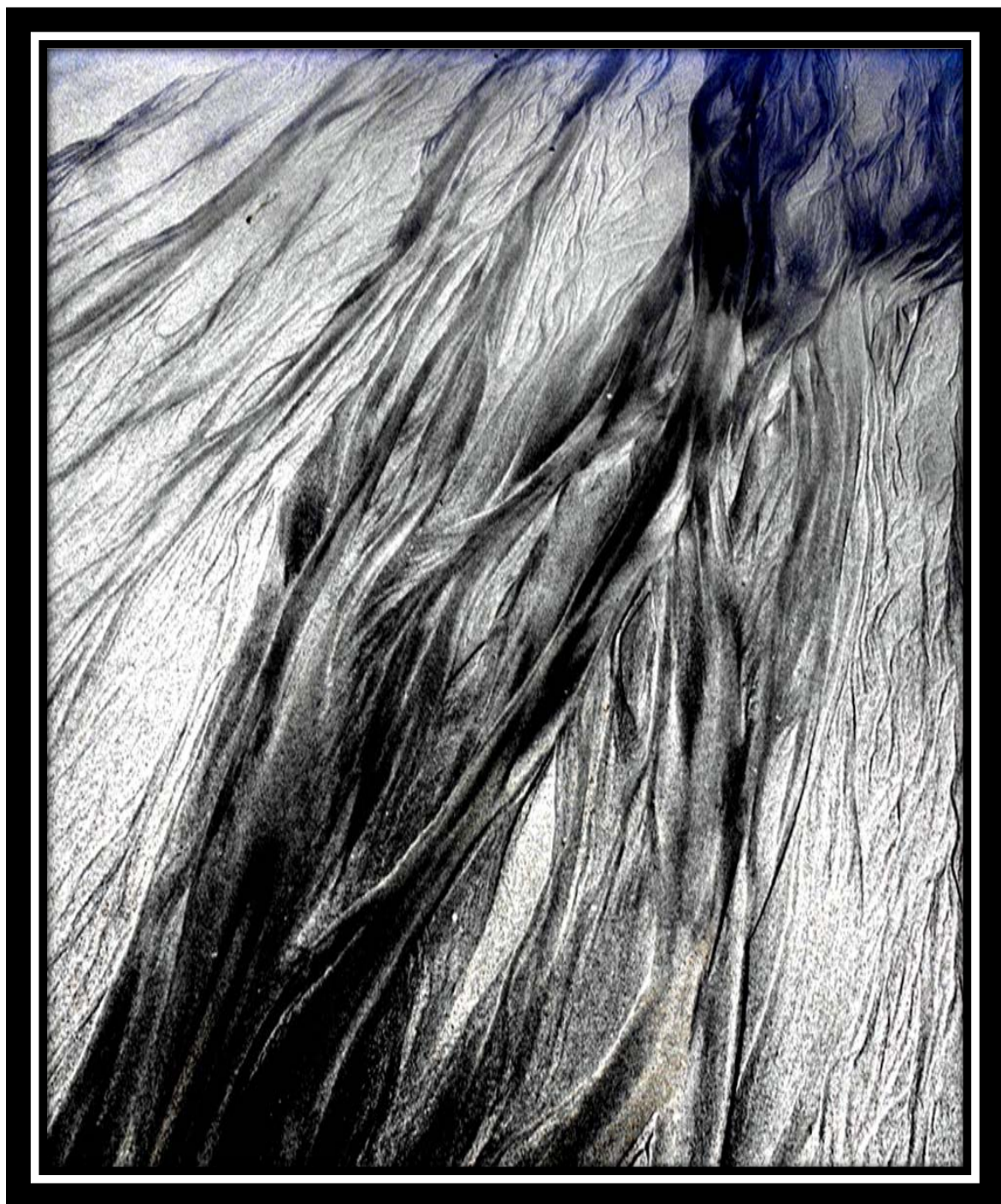# Recognising and working with emergent language in the ESOL classroom

Aims and Methods

Aim: to use recordings of the student led parts ESOL classes as a tool to help us recognise and work with emerging language.

'Student led' refers to the times during a lesson where students were pushing themselves to communicate, where the topics were to a great extent driven by their conversations and discussions, often as it turned out, in the form of short accounts and anecdotes. These stories reflect some of the joys and difficulties of immigrant life in 21st century London.

'Emerging language' refers to language at the cutting edge of learners' capabilities, often appearing spontaneously and unpredictably in a range of different classroom contexts[0]. Recognising this language can give us an insight into where learners are at in their learning journey, painting a more complex picture of progression than that presented in individual learning plans and assessment criteria.

Our data

7 hours of ESOL classes were recorded at Tower Hamlets College in east London over a period of 2 months. Of these recordings, 3 hours of classroom discussions, conversations and stories were transcribed.

An analysis of the data was informed and inspired by conversations with teachers involved in the project and related research carried out in the field of language learning (*referenced in the appendix and in the main text with a number [0]*).

The language learners that feature in the project were adults, mostly from Bangladesh and Somalia but also from Egypt, Iraq, Ivory Coast, Vietnam, and Latvia. The proficiency level ranged from ESOL Entry 1 to Level 1. (All names have been changed)

Summary

The booklet does not follow a strict order and most chapters are stand alone.

1. Giving students a second chance

"Tell us again – just a bit more slowly, from the beginning"

Lesson context. A discussion was leading into an exam related reading activity about child safety in shopping centres. But the students decided to tell stories about how their children misbehave in shops. In this extract a student is telling a story to the class about how her young child tried to steal a pair of shoes

---

( ) pause

Student: one time my son go to shoe, shoes shop then he just I'm (3) try ,this one is right for him or no.. then Ahmed like one shoes the angry bird. he is very like and he not uh (2) like uh(4) not put the box he wearing and told this is mine and go but this shoes is very expensive eh uh then my husband uh (2) uh long time (1) told uh (1) talking with uh him but he not understand then uh (1) (laughing) finally buying(1) this shoe, this shoes

15 seconds of pausing

Teacher : just tell us again a bit, you know, more slowly , explain from the beginning what happened

---

Student: (quieter) one day I, went to the shoes shop(1) try out one shoes for my uh (2) son then he's v,very like (1) liked(1) the shoes angry bird he not want to uh (1) put the box, still wearing then he go to outside no this is, this is mine , but like 10 or 15 minutes talking my husband with him but he don't understand , this is mine and finally I buy, bought this eh shoes

6 seconds of pausing

The story was a difficult one to tell the first time round so the teacher straight away asks the student to have another go. In the second telling there are a number of improvements

First version	Second version	Improvements
15 seconds of pausing	6 seconds of pausing	sounds more fluent.
4 uses of 'then' (lines 1,2,5,6)	2 uses of 'then' (line 2, 3)	she uses 'then' before significant pauses to give herself thinking time. Our data shows that entry level learners use 'then' a lot in this way but higher level learners use it much less.
One time my son go to shoe, shoes shop then he just I'm try this one right for him or no	**One day** I **went** to the shoe shop try out some shoes for my son	*shoes shop -> the shoe shop.* *go -> went.* says everything in a single more complex utterance: [*go somewhere to do something for somebody.*] marks the beginning of the story with adverbial – '*one day*'.
then my husband uh (2)uh long time (1) told uh(1) talking with uh him but he not understand	but like 10 or 15 minutes talking my husband with him but he **don't understand**	*no understand -> don't understand.* less pausing. She leaves out 'told' a difficult verb to use accurately (is this a good thing?).
then finally buying(1) this shoe, this shoes	**and finally I** buy, **bought** this shoes	*buying -> I buy -> bought.* marks the end of the story more appropriately '*and finally*'.

Say it again Salma

When students come out with an anecdote or bit of gossip in class, it may be the first time they have told this story (in English). It would seem that giving them a chance to re-tell is invaluable, sometimes just so they can sound more fluent. Some research has shown this second opportunity also allows students to pay more attention to details[1] and they may:

- use more complex language
- self-correct more
- take more risks, be more ambitious [2].

> Salma is an E2 student who has been in the UK for over 20 years. In these extracts she is talking about buying a dress for her daughter.
>
> **Extract from first telling   ( ) pause   (.) pause of less than a second   T: teacher**
>
> *daughter eh said in (.) finish her GCSE then he nice dress (.)buy nice dress (T:OK OK) I said is OK (T: yeah) (1) then she she choose (.) buy dress is (.) sixty (.) pound*
>
> **Extract from second telling**
>
> *She say mum (.) my finish GCSE (1) I bou (1) is school (1) my friends nice clothes (1) my no(.) my doesn't nice dress (1) I buy I buy (.) nice dress (.) I said go come to me (.) which one do you like? (.)she say mum (.) I like this one but so expensive (.)I said (2) don't worry (.) I paid (1) you choose*

Rather than ask questions to elicit more details, the teacher simply asks Salma to tell the story again and she is more ambitious in her second telling, taking the audience into a little dialogue with her daughter. She also looks to the teacher less for support.

Chunks

Moving into a dialogue is an effective technique for bringing the listener into the world of the story[3]. Our data shows that a lot of our students use dialogue in this way. But in Salma's case is it also a strategy to move the story forward in a less complicated language format (dialogue instead of narrative)? It is also interesting that Salma's second attempt contains a lot of what could be memorized chunks of language

"she say/my friends/ I said/which one do you like?/I like this one/so expensive/don't worry/I paid"

- How do these chunks reflect the type of English she uses outside the class?
- Is it worth breaking the grammar out of these chunks or should we just expand her repertoire by adding more?

2. One small step, one giant leap

Sara's problem – settling children in a new country

The class are talking about their futures and maybe, one day, moving out of Tower Hamlets. This student – Sara -(less than a year in London) uses the opportunity to tell the class how difficult it is for her children to adapt to life in a new city

T: Teacher   S: Sara   S2/S3: other students   ( ) seconds of pause

T: So where do you want to live?

S: uhh (2) I (2)

T: where do you (1) want?

S: in in tower hamlets

T: in tower hamlets?

S: yeah yeah because

T: not far away?

S: For me no problem, for me, (2) for me, outside tower hamlets nice (1) no (1) no problem for my, my children school (2) no another school because one years in London my children one years in London no every years another school, problem (S2: big problem yes) because I have small um small daughter uhm (1) one years in this school, it's a very problem because, coming in Italy another school, another language, another friend, another teacher after one year, another school, another teacher. It's a very problem for (S3: for children)

Working with emergent language

Although there are only 2 verbs in Salma's story (I *have* small daughter / *coming* in Italy) she manages to get her message across. How?

- She starts her complaint by summarizing the situation, *"one years in London my children one years in London, no every years another school"*
- Most of the necessary information is in noun combinations, many of which contain a repeated word. "for me , for my children , one year, no every year, another school, another language, another friend etc."
- This repetition has the duel function of adding emphasis and helping her maintain her fluency

Listening back to a recording of the class, the teacher retold Sara's account in his own words.

When I came here it was very difficult for me because my children had to start from the beginning , they need to have new school, they need to learn a new language and they need to start making new friends and also they will have new teachers they don't know.

Working with combinations

Sara speaks a basic learner variety of English, which is organised around nouns[4]. Verbs are just beginning to emerge. So if we use the teachers re-telling - take out the verbs (and a couple of adjectives) then add them to the learner's nouns, we have the following collocations:

it's **difficult for** me/my children

come from Italy

start another school

learn another language

make new friends

have new teachers.

It's a **big** problem

It is likely that Sara already knows these verbs and adjectives – just not actively in these combinations. She already uses repetition effectively for emphasis and to maintain fluency. Perhaps we can harness the repetition in her story as a way of practicing these new verb- noun combinations.

Would Salma be able to re-tell her story using just these combinations as prompts?

3. Learning journeys – from nouns to verbs

In a European wide study of immigrant language learners in the 1980s[5], it was suggested that although learners took different routes to proficiency, they passed through 3 distinct stages, when their speech contained:

1. **mostly nouns**
2. **mostly non-finite verbs** (verbs not marked for tense e.g. '*coming*')
3. **mostly finite verbs** (verbs marked for tense '*came*' or modality '*may come*')

Here is a student in the 'mostly noun' world (Salma from the previous chapter, talking about her children having to change school all the time)

( ) pause   (.) pause of less than a second

"*for me, outside tower hamlets nice (1) no (1) no problem for my (.)my children school (2) no another school because one years in London my children one years in London no every years another school (.) problem*"

Another student (Hasna) is emerging through all three stages in one utterance (she is talking about her son getting his thumb caught in a neighbour's front door)

"*me and my father in law and sister (.) everybody quick c'(1) quick coming quick went to her door*"

- *Everybody quick (noun only)*
- *Quick coming (non-finite verb)*
- *Quick went to her door (finite verb)*

As learners progress, they move through changing landscapes. Verbs replace the nouns and begin to play an important role in organizing utterances[6].

The following student utterances contain verbs but these verbs are not organizing the utterances.

> *"I little bit is speak English"*
>
> *"The GP said your speak is good"*
>
> *"My children is grow and job and university"*
>
> *"Which country is more need money?"*

In these examples, the students are using 'is' as a default verb and then putting the more appropriate verb in the object or subject position.

What to focus on in our teaching?

How can we use this evidence (from the students in this chapter and the previous one) to inform our teaching? An analysis of 40 million words of spoken and written English reveals that:

90% of all verbs are either present simple (46%) or past simple (44%). All the progressive and perfect verb forms combined make up only 10%.[7]

So when we focus on verbs with our students, **perhaps we should worry less about whether the student is using the right form but instead focus on the collocations and patterns that go with the verb**. For example we can look at how the verb organizes what comes after it.

> Example 1
>
> Through repetition, Hasna gets her message across (same story as before – about her son)
>
> *he is (.) play in outside (1) he mm he was play (.) played my next door neighbour (.) my next door neighbour boy ah boy*

She improves with every utterance but does not have the resources to maintain her fluency <u>and</u> to say *where* her son was playing and with *who*:

He was playing outside with the boy next door. [**play** [somewhere] **with** [someone].

Example 2

This student uses more complex verb patterns the second time she tells her story

First telling

One time my son go to shoe (.) shoes shop then he just I'm try this one right for him or no

Second telling

One day I **went** to the shoe shop **try out** some shoes **for** my son

[**go** somewhere **to do** something **for** somebody]

According to one definition, fluency can be measured not by an increase in speed or a reduction in pausing but "*an increase in the length and complexity of utterances between pausing*"[8]

There are a wide range of verb patterns in English, at varying degrees of complexity. Learner dictionaries (especially the example sentences with the definition) often contain useful information about the collocations and patterns that go with a verb.

Perhaps we can raise students' awareness of how important verbs are, not so much for marking aspects of time, but how they can organize utterances and sentences.

4. The strategic world of the language learner

Different learners use different strategies to deal with pressures of communicating in real time[9].

Planners[10]

This E2 student is a planner, she thinks before she speaks, that's why there are lots of pauses. After each of the pauses she comes out with quite complex language for her level.

> Context: talking about going back to her country for a holiday.
>
> ( ) pause (.) pause of less than a second
>
> *Actually I want come back uh (.) my country uh so um (3) now I am happy because I didn't see my family for a long time(.) ah (.) and um (1) I bought some present for my family (1) uh and I'm looking I looking forward to it (2) so I want stay uh (1) about three months*

Here is another student who also uses planning as a strategy, perhaps less successfully if we look at the frequency and length of the pauses.

> *I made some cakes (2) in my home (2) and (3) then I go (2) Westfield (.)then I go to Westfield*

Correctors[11]

This student is a corrector – her strategy is to speak first and think later! She starts speaking *without* a plan and works it out as she goes along.

> Context: the little boy next door has just slammed the front door on her son's finger.
>
> *"me and my father in law and sister (.) everybody quick c'(1) quick coming quick went to her door"*
>
> Her utterances get more complex as she repeats from 'everybody quick' (no verb) -> 'quick coming' (non-finite verb) 'quick went to her door' (finite verb).

She is constructing her turns through a series of short repeated utterances, which allows her to activate language at the 'cutting edge' of her capabilities.

When looking at emerging language – 'correctors' are more interesting than 'planners' – because we can almost see what's happening in the learners head, **we can see the words and phrases and grammar emerging 'on line'.**

Satisfaction

Higher level learners may not feel satisfied with a first attempt, and search for a better version of what they've just said.

Context: This student is talking about a time when she made a big change in her life.

"I didn't feel satisfied in my life (.) I was so busy but I didn't feel (2) encouraged for myself I didn't find my life (2) useful I didn't feel satisfied"

Linguistically there is nothing wrong with "I didn't feel satisfied in my life" but she is searching for a better version. This searching can be seen as a positive strategy – looking for a more appropriate word or phrase is a sign that this student is pushing herself and maybe keeping her language system open and in a state of development[12]. If students are too satisfied with the most accessible, simple language, they may find it increasingly harder to improve. The words they know become less accessible with every 'non attempt' to search for them and they may end up with a quite a closed system. A system that is much less responsive to instruction.

However learners who overuse this strategy of rephrasing in search of a better version can end up speaking quite a lot but actually saying very little!

5. Reformulations – teaching through conversation

A reformulation or recast is when the teacher repeats back what the student has said with improvements. The focus is on improving the whole message rather than correcting a specific language item.

Example – *from a discussion about anti-social behaviour in a student's building*

Student: if afternoon, if I putting the bin, I didn't go because I'm scared

Teacher: oh you were scared to take the rubbish down?

The teacher is really just summarizing and checking she has understood the student. But in doing so she has **upgraded** the language to a more clear and natural version. And there is potentially a new lexical item – **take the rubbish down** and also a new structure - **adjective + infinitive (scared to do something).**

The teacher in the above example said the following about reformulation:

"*it comes naturally to me, I probably do it with all my friends, it shows our understanding , it shows our empathy but I guess what I'm trying to do here is make sure that I have actually heard what they're saying and they'll always say no if it's wrong if I'm completely off the track. It's a form of checking*"

So we intuitively pitch the reformulation at the students' level. "They'll always say no if I'm completely off track".

Did the student notice the upgrade in the reformulation?

Probably not – the student was too involved in what she was saying and there is no evidence from the transcripts that she noticed this upgrade

Did **other students in the class** notice?

Perhaps. It is more likely that other students were able to pay attention to language because they are not directly involved in this exchange; the spotlight was not on them.

Can we capture these reformulations?

Yes ☺ - **but we have to be careful.** The beauty of reformulations are that they provide a natural conversational scaffolding to what the students are saying – in leveraging these reformulations for pedagogical purposes we are in danger of focusing too much on language form and disrupting the flow of the discussion or conversation. **See the next page for some ideas** ⟶

Method 1 - Strike while the iron is hot

1. Put our reformulation on the board/on card **– just after we say it** - without interrupting the flow of the discussion

2. **Later** – at the end of the discussion – perhaps we have a collection of these 'upgrades' as **a record of the conversation**. Now there is more time and space to look at the language and :

- use the reformulations to recall/summarize the conversation
- answer students' questions about words
- look at grammar patterns that surround the words (at that moment or in a later class)

☺ The advantage with this method is that very topical language that we upgrade from the students at the beginning of a conversation is likely be recycled several times before the discussion finishes.

Method 2 - Storage

1. Keep a note of our reformulations **as we say them**. Perhaps repeat the reformulation – to make it more salient.

2. Wait until the end of the discussion or **a natural break** in an activity to put the reformulations on the board

3. Discuss reformulations / Ask students if they can use the reformulations to recall or summarize the conversation

☺ The advantage with this method is we are only **orally** drawing attention to language form during the discussion and so are less likely to interrupt the flow.

⚑ Warning

It is important to remember that the main focus of our reformulations is – as the teacher said – to check we have understood, to summarize or just show empathy. It is important we don't over work this natural conversational lubricant for teaching purposes.

The following reformulations all come from a class where students are discussing letters they had written to their landlord about problems in and around their flats.

S: student   T: teacher   Potential teaching opportunities **in bold**

Context –a landlord not fixing a broken balcony

S: he tell me I can't fix it

*T: he **says** he can't fix it*

Potential teaching point

By emphasizing the reporting verb (says) – we suggest that we don't believe what follows. Very useful when reporting conversations with landlords!

Context - A student is worried someone might come to fix her leaking ceiling when she is away

S: because next week they send to me next week someone, what can I do?

*T: Ah so you're **worried they might come**

Potential teaching point

The teacher has elaborated the student's original utterance 'what can I do' and introduced modality – might – which our data shows is a rare verb at Entry level.

'Worried' collocates with 'might' in a context of 'showing concern' - e.g. *I'm worried he might forget/I'm worried you might get hurt etc.*

Context - Student is talking about kids smoking drugs in the stairwell

S: before in my front of door because if afternoon if I putting the bin, I didn't go because I'm scared now (1) they didn't this sit in stairs ,sitting stairs not out front of building

*T: Oh before they **used to** smoke drugs at the front of the building (S2: yeah yeah) and you were **scared to take the rubbish down***

Potential teaching points

used to - at the beginning of the utterance – makes the context clear for the listener

scared to do something - adjective + to do something

take something down - useful verb pattern, if you live in a block of flats!

We are activators

A big part of picking up on emergent student language in classroom conversation is simply activating what is already there. Here are some more examples

A student, who was a customs officer for 30 years, is explaining his job

S: I was in black market

T: Ok black market, you mean contraband?

S: yes contraband contraband, cocaine marijuana

A student is talking about sharing household tasks

S: When finish food , then we go shopping

T: Ok so when food runs out , you go shopping

S: Yes run out, then I go shopping (1) with my wife.

The student responses in the above examples suggest that they recognise the words the teacher provides 'contraband' and 'run out'. A language learner will have a large store of half known, less active vocabulary, which they can only use after a search or if they hear it from someone else first[13].

Perhaps in these situations **we are more 'activators' than 'teachers'**, helping students increase connectivity with the less accessible parts of their lexicon and at the same time providing a scaffold to keep the conversation going.

6. Letting the talk do the work

The same words and grammar get repeated throughout a conversation[14]. This repetition holds the conversation together, so student language we improve and rework at the beginning is likely to be naturally recycled as this conversation progresses. Here is an example:

Deal with it!

A student is giving advice to another student about a landlord who is unwilling to do any repairs.

*S2: I think she can make herself she can go to citizen advice bureau and they will help you, they will **dealing for your case***

Possible reworking: they will **deal with** your case

3 minutes later in the same discussion, students are complaining how ineffective the police and council are at dealing with anti-social behaviour

*S1: is a same problem I have but because no one the police is coming just the one time, they go away **the problem you have only yourself is***

Possible reworking: **you have to deal with it yourself**

1 minute later – on the same topic

*S2: yeah we spoke in council Tower Hamlets home and they **dealing our all building** and neighbours, they **dealing this** you know*

Possible reworking: ***they are dealing with this /sorting it out***

We can see from the above examples that, **the cyclical nature of conversation has the potential to teach the language for us**. If we don't put words in as a discussion moves along, are we underexploiting a valuable resource?

We are gardeners
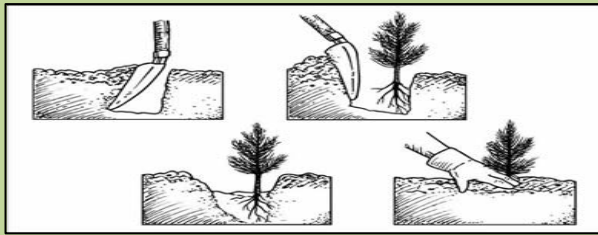
Student led conversations can emerge in a surge of energy, with opinions, disagreements and anecdotes flying all over the place. If we can reformulate some of the student contributions, then when things have died down, we can use the words contained in these reformulations to look back at what was said and perhaps observe the surrounding grammar

To use a gardening analogy:

1. through reformulation, we can plant relevant lexis during a conversation,
2. **the natural repetition in the conversation helps this lexis to take root**
3. we can tend to the surrounding grammar at the end, for example:

In the above discussion about unresponsive landlords, we can see from the first example and the last one that this student already knows 'deal' but not 'with'. She knows the meaning but not the complete form. In the middle example the student implies the meaning.

A closer look at 'deal with' in the above contexts reveals the word's *'ecological niche':*

Deal with is common in progressive verb forms (they are dealing with it)

Deal with collocates with modal verbs of obligation (have to) as do other words with similar meaning and form - 'live with' 'put up with' 'cope with'

Deal with occurs around words like 'issue' 'problem' 'matter', 'situation'- but often refers to these words with the pronoun 'it' – 'deal with it'

Within and between conversations

When a teacher reformulates a student's utterance, this reformulation is not just recycled within a conversation **but also between conversations**, as one teacher pointed out:

"I think if you can figure out how you'd say it naturally in English, it's valuable. What I would naturally say are probably words that I will use again through the year"

7. A division of labour
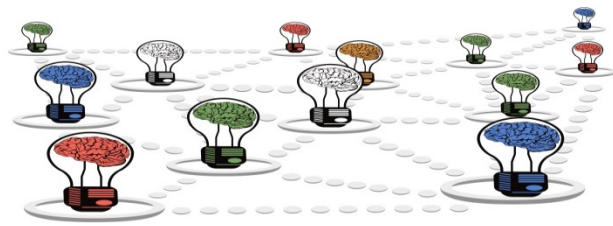
An Egyptian student, recently arrived in the UK via Italy, is trying to explain why she likes neither of the presidential candidates in her country's elections but comes unstuck and ends up getting frustrated.

( ) pause   S?: unidentified student   T: Teacher

S5: and Murci , problem , problem, another people no like because some problem ,some problem mmm, in Murci problem an de Sisi big problem under Sisi big problem under Mubarak (S?: Mubarak) because eh eh, como se dici, every, everyone like uh (4) (S? another people) no like, no like Egypt like for you for (makes money sign) (S?: for money) for money (T: ahh) no for people

(S5 hits her forehead with the base of her palm in a sign of frustration at not being able to express herself)

Over the next 10 minutes the rest of the class , 9 students - mostly Bangladeshi , start telling the teacher about the political situation in their country. This is not an easy task for a group of E1 learners but collaboratively, they managed it. They could do it because there was division of labour, with students helping and correcting each other. 7 of the 9 students took part with a fairly even distribution of turns. **No one student was capable of explaining the political situation in their country but collectively they could.**

Teacher's role

Over the next 10 minutes there was a role reversal. The students were informing the teacher –not the other way round – (at one point a student even exclaims to the teacher, "no, you don't understand").

In this role the teacher is a listener, collecting in new information, recording it and at times rephrasing. On the next page, there are a couple of extracts from the discussion. The highlighted text shows the language that was emerging related to a lexical set. **words in red - that the student said related to a lexical set** / **words in green – that the students *almost* said related to a lexical set**

S3: **corruption** is too much high

T: corruption is *too* much high? What do you mean Selina?

S4: yes because all, are not , not, (S3: honest) **honest people** is (S5: **dishonest, dishonest)**

S8: no, vote , she said(2) our country is not **vote** , no it is not true

T: our country is not?

S4: **election**

T: ah there's no vote,(S? election) there are no elections

(noise)(3)

S7: no you don't understand.

T: Ok explain it

S7: I said eh…. One is change one eh (3)

S2: she said , when gover, **government makes …..another law**,(s7: yes law) **change law** they are not **voting for** that

S5: she don't want the voting , (S?: she is thinking only?) she is thinking her, (2) team and change the one rules **(thinking of her party/ change the law)**

Combining **what the students actually said (in red)** with **the potential upgrades (in green),** we can see an emerging E1 lexical set around the topic of politics. The box below contains all the language that came out of the 10 minute discussion. This set could be worked on and expanded in later classes:

in crisis/economy/going up day by day/corrupt/corruption/honest- dishonest/the main problem is/ criminals/government/afraid of the police/make a law/change the law/break the law/vote for/party

At the end of the discussion, with these words available (on the board/on cards) we could have then turned to the Egyptian woman, who was having difficulties at the beginning of the discussion and said, '*OK, here are some words to help you, NOW try to tell the person next to you about the political situation in your country.'*

23

8. Pop up stories

A student story will often pop up unexpectedly in a class and mark the beginning of a detour from the lesson plan. This story then prompts other students to tell their stories. The following example comes from a vocational support for childcare class.

Context: As a lead-in to an exam related reading task, the students are discussing child safety while shopping.

( ) pause   T: teacher   S: student

T: any other things that could happen? (2) Paola?

S1: *if you go the food shopping, they have many sh, foods on display without (1) packing the children might be eat from there be careful of that (3) I don't know but I saw sometimes, they took and they (1) ate, mothers don't know (laughter from the class) (student speaks louder) then they paid too much then they paid too m' because they eat (laughter) careful when people eat or, is especially happen is two three years (?)*

(General noise and laughter – as students start trying to give related stories all at the same time)

T; lets uh, let's have, Miriyam let's have one group discussion , Faduma then Abdia then maybe Shafia

Here the teacher is acting as a chairperson and allocates students turns to tell their story. In such an animated gathering, nominating turns seems like quite a natural participation structure. For the next 10 minutes, 4 students take turns in telling their little anecdotes and the topic becomes 'children misbehaving in shops'.

Pop-up forums

The decision the teacher has to make is whether to exploit these stories and this participation structure for language work. Perhaps in the following way:

Student tells her story about her child taking things from shops

The other students in the class respond to the story

This language feeds into the next story

Teacher highlights some nice language the student uses that could be useful for the other stories **'food on display'** 'children might.....' and some of the things the student could have said more clearly – more evocatively. Examples from the above story may include:

Children help themselves/mothers don't realize/end up paying/keep an eye on

In this particular class 2 of the 4 stories were about children 'helping themselves' and the parents 'end up paying '. So language introduced by the teacher at the end of the first anecdote, would have been recycled.

With language feedback, the 10 minute story telling detour perhaps expands into half an hour. This participation structure, set up by the teacher, gives order to an unplanned part of the lesson. **These pop up story telling forums could become a regular feature of a course and help students realise that their anecdotes are valued and can be a memorable source of language learning**

9. We are story tellers

Stories in the form of narratives, anecdotes and gossip sequences make up a large part of our everyday talk[15]. Stories have structures[16], in the same way that sentences do but unlike sentence structures; we don't need to teach students how to construct a story because they import these skills from their first language.

Story One (from the previous chapter)

Context: this student is talking about young children stealing things from shops

( ) pause (.) pause of less than a second

S1: if you go the food shopping, they have many sh, foods on display without (1) packing the children might be eat from there be careful of that (3) I don't know but I saw sometimes they took and they (1) ate (.) mothers don't know (class laughter)(student starts speaking louder) then they paid too much then they paid too m' because they eat (laughter) careful when people eat or (.) is especially happen is two three years (?)

Story Structure

Orientation (where, when and who)

if you go the food shopping, they have many sh, foods on display without (1) packing the children might be eat from there be careful of that

Incident (what happened)

I don't know but I saw sometimes they took and they (1) ate (.) mothers don't know (*class laughter*) (*student starts speaking louder*) then they paid too much then they paid too m' because they eat (class laughter)

Reaction (how did you/they feel)

Careful when people eat or, is especially happen is two three years (?)

Story Two

Context: students are talking about anti-social behaviour in their buildings

S2: I was you know scared as well (1) and you know one day (.) um three years ago (1) uh it was nine o 'clock and my husband he wasn't at home (.) and the man was (.) uh one of the man was kicking my door (1) and I didn't open the door and I went to window, my kitchen window say, I said , why you kicking my (1) door ? he said another guy is (.) (S?:I live this building) (.) he just didn't know he just kicking (1) I was so you know (.) scared and my children they wake up and I was shaking (starts laughing)

T: absolutely did she do the right thing- not go to the door (.) just going to the window?

S2: maybe the person maybe goes to looking for some other for …(T: someone else) other floor mistakenly came to my door

Story Structure

Orientation

I was you know scared as well (1) and you know one day (.) um three years ago (1) uh it was nine o 'clock and my husband he wasn't at home

Incident

and the man was (.) uh one of the man was kicking my door (1) and I didn't open the door and I went to window, my kitchen window say, I said , why you kicking my (1) door ? he said another guy is (S? I live this building) he just didn't know he just kicking (1)

Reaction

I was so you know (.) scared and my children they wake up and I was shaking (laughing)…….. maybe the person maybe goes to looking for some other for …(T: someone else) other floor mistakenly came to my door

They know the tune but not the words!

Students know the story telling outline, they know the shape of a story but they just don't always have the language available to colour it in. So story stages can be excellent frames for us to teach/practice words and grammar[17]. **Placing language within larger communicative functions, reminds students that learning words and grammar is a means to an end (in this case story telling) not the end in itself.**

Each stage of a story has typical language. The examples below come from the 2 student stories above.

Orientation stage

References to time – one day, three years ago, it was nine o'clock

References to place – food on display, husband not at home

References to feelings – I was so scared

Incident stage

Transitive verbs/action verbs – was kicking my door, they took (something), they eat (something)

Past continuous/simple contrast – was kicking my door and I didn't open the door and I went to the window.

A switch to direct speech/present tense – to bring the listener into the world of the story[19]. – I said " why you kicking my door?"

Reaction stage

Use of modality to speculate on causes – maybe the person go looking for someone else

Emphatic language as a way of ending and giving the story significance – I was *so* scared (that) I was shaking

Is *especially* happen is two or three years old

Warnings in the form of imperatives

Be careful! (watch out/make sure…etc.)

The words in their stories

Then

Time connectors like 'then' and 'when' are not actually very common when we tell stories. They are redundant because the listener assumes that one event follows the other[18]. Time does not need to be explicitly marked.

Taking out all the students' stories from our classroom recordings – about 1 hour in total - (10,000 words of transcribed speech), we can see that:

In stories told by E3/L1 learners 'then' is the 37th most common word. But in stories told by E1/E2 learners 'then' is the 9th most common word. Lower proficiency learners rely heavily on 'then' just to give them thinking time:

Example: Students are discussing when they first came to the UK.

( ) pause   (.) pause of less than a second

*First day I came to England (.) **then** I afraid (.) because I have (.) no speak (.) I don't have n' (1) speak English **then** I afraid (1) after I (.) very worried because I left my mum and dad and my all family (.) **then** I alone (2) **then** my children grow up c' I went to ESOL class I speak little bit English **then** I (.) my froud (proud) and am happy*

So?

A causal connector like 'so' is more common than time connectors (then) for moving a story forward or introducing a 'result' to the story[19]:

Example: a student is talking about finding an i-phone in the ladies toilets.

- *S: She told me (.) you can give it to me then I can give it to the reception.*

- *T: what did you say?*

- *S: I said , um, (2) at that time (.) I don't know what (2) what I have to do **so** I said OK um if you can give it to the reception that should be fine.*

In the above example 'so' links the thought "I don't know what I have to do" and the resulting action '**so I said........**'

In the classroom data, there are around 40 examples of 'so' in the E1/E2 stories and the same amount in the E3/L1 stories. But there is a difference in usage:

At E1/E2 levels the vast majority of uses of 'so' (80%) are as intensifiers [so happy, so many people], only 20% of uses of 'so' are as connectors.

At higher levels E3/L1 - 'so' as a connector is much more common: 64% connectors, 36% intensifiers.

If we can teach connectors in chunks ('so I said' 'and finally') these chunks can help students maintain a flow and gives them more thinking time, from which they can construct longer more complex utterances.

Here are some more connecting 'chunks' from our classroom recordings:

'so that's why' [often to end a story or explanation]

'at that time' [to fill in details, separate from the main story line –"at that time my daughter was 3 or 4"]

'so I'm thinking' [to comment on what is happening in the story]

 'and I was + adjective' ["and I was so scared/and I was excited/and I was happy about it"]

see the next page for some more

And I thought married life was so happy!

When we tell a story, it is quite common that we step out of the narrative and comment on how we were feeling. Good story tellers give commentaries like this all the time[20]. Here are some examples from our students:

(*student finds a phone in the ladies toilet*) **and I was standing, thinking** , what I do I have to do?

(*student talks about a crossroads in her life*) **so I asked myself** what next, what I have to do what ah, what a next step

(*student finds an injured bird on the street*) **then I thinking** is too late for me to help the little bird

(*student dealing with a difficult mother in law*) **and I thought** married life was so happy

The highlighted words above are useful chunks to teach lower level learners. The tricky past tense verb 'thought' could be practiced in the chunk 'and I thought'. One teacher encouraged his E2 students to say '*and I thought oh my god!* " to comment on the most dramatic moment in the story!

The most common verbs

According to our data, when students told stories, the following were the most common past simple verbs:

1. was
2. said
3. didn't
4. came
5. went
6. did
7. told
8. made
9. liked
10. bought

Our data set is relatively small (about 40 short anecdotes) and some of the longer stories may influence overall verb rankings. However, it is interesting to note that 9 out of the 10 verbs are irregular. **This suggests that controlling the past simple with any consistency is more a question of lexis than grammar**

These findings are backed up by other (more in depth) studies of immigrant language learning. An Italian immigrant to the UK moved through the following stages[21]

- At 6 months the irregular verbs 'said /went/was' were the first to emerge in her repertoire.
- At 11 months she was using most of the irregular past simple verbs forms but no 'ed' regular forms
- At 14 months regular 'ed' forms start to appear.

This student received no formal instruction during the period, yet she progressed along the same lines as our ESOL students, in spite of having a different first language. So if our learners just have opportunities to use the language, will they progress regardless of what we actually 'teach'?

10.   Conclusions

Sometimes our classroom data speaks for itself, sometimes the researcher is blinkered by his own biases! The conclusions reached in this booklet are tentative and the questions they generate can hopefully become platforms for further (formal and informal) classroom research.

- Our data suggests that, with repeated tellings, students improve the delivery of their stories and opinions. What activities do we know that encourage repetition?
- If conversations and discussions naturally recycle language once they get started, how can we use this recycling for teaching purposes?
- Reformulating is a natural tool for scaffolding interaction with a less proficient interlocutor. Are we aware of how useful the language contained in these reformulations can be for the student? How can we capture this language without interrupting the flow?
- How can we make the most of natural breaks in student led parts of the class for taking stock of what has just been said and looking at language?
- How can we use students' stories as vehicles for language learning?
- Large scale studies of language use suggest that an important role of verbs is to generate patterns and collocations[22]. In our teaching are we placing too much emphasis on verbs simply as markers of time?
- Can we be intervening more during conversations to help re-activate 'forgotten' words?
- How beneficial or detrimental are communication strategies to a learner's progress? How can we help students and teachers be more aware of these strategies?

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.

The project was inspired in a large part by the philosophy that language teaching can be conversation driven, with a focus on real language use. I first learnt about the potential of this approach through the teaching of Neil Forrest, my Diploma tutor at International House, Barcelona and then subsequently through the writing of his colleague Scott Thornbury.

Richard Gallen – teacher – Tower Hamlets College – July 2014.

Bibliography

'Conversation from Description to Pedagogy'. Scott Thornbury, Diana Slade Cambridge University Press, 2006 **(3,14,15,16,17,18,19,20)**

'Second Language Acquisition by Adult Immigrants: A Field Manual'. Clive Perdue European Science Foundation Newbury House 1984 **(4,5,6,21)**

'Strategies in Interlanguage Communication' C. Faerch and G. Kasper. (Eds.). New York: Longman. 1983. **(9,10,11)**

'Complex Systems and Applied Linguistics'. Diane Larsen-Freeman and Lynn Cameron. Oxford University Press 2008. **(0,12)**

'A Cognitive Approach to Language Learning.' Peter Skehan. Oxford University Press 1998 **(1, 2)**

'Longman Student Grammar of Spoken and Written English'. Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad, Geoffrey Leech. Longman 2002 **(7,22)**

"The Development of Fluency in Advanced Learners of French," Applied Linguistics, 1, 84-119 Towell, R., Hawkins, R., and Bazergui, N. (1996). in Thornbury and Slade 2006 **(8)**

'Receptive vs Productive Aspects of Vocabulary'- Francine Melka in Vocabulary, Description, Acquisition and Pedagogy N. Schmitt and M.McCarthy (Eds) 1997 **(13)**