9 The grammar of spoken English

9.1 Spoken and written language: Some differences

Here is an extract from a discussion between two people talking about their fear of heights. It contains several features which are common in spoken English, but unusual or non-existent in written English.

1. CB: I don't particularly like heights. Erm. Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. Erm, the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind, because there's a barrier around you. But heights where you think you may be able to fall.
2. BB: Yeah. I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere. But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says 'Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.' I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet …
3. CB: Yeah.
4. BB: … with a rail about – perhaps eighteen inches high …
5. CB: Mm.
6. BB: … and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something. I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.
7. CB: That's very frightening.
8. BB: And, you know, I sort of edged round. I couldn't go back through the same door. I edged round and managed to find the other door. And that's it. Ever since then if I go up a ladder I'm scared stiff now. It really is, it's er, changed my whole life, you know. Absolutely frightening, that.

Task 9.1:

Look at the dialogue above and answer these questions:

1. Look at turns 1 and 2. There are several occurrences of *er* and *erm*. What function do you think these noises serve?
2. Why do the speakers say *something like a lighthouse **or something; I sort of** edged round*?
3. In turn 2 BB says, *I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay.* Why does he repeat himself?
4. Are there any words in turn **2** which you would not expect to find in written English?
5. What is unusual about the structure of the sentence, *The top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind*?
6. How many sentences are there in turn 1?
7. What is the verb in the last sentence in turn 8?
8. Is turn 6 grammatical?
9. At turns 3, 5 and 7, CB actually interrupts the narrative. Is she being rude?
10. It is often said that you should not start a sentence with *and* or *but*. How many sentences in this extract start with *and* or *but*? Why do you think this is?
11. What is unusual about the final sentence in turn 1?

1. Most spoken discourse is composed in real time. Speakers are working out what they want to say and producing language at the same time. This is no simple task. It is not surprising that even native speakers sometimes need time to gather their thoughts. So one of the functions of *er* and *erm* is to allow time for them to do this. Very often the *er/erm* occurs just after a possible completion point, a point at which the speaker may be seen to have finished a turn. This may well be the cause for the following:

    > I don't particularly like heights. **Erm.** Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall. **Erm,** the top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind …

    *Er*s and *erm*s are often referred to as 'fillers', as though they had no meaning or function, but they clearly serve a purpose. *Er/erm* often means 'Please let me continue. I haven't finished what I want to say, and I'd like a little time to gather my thoughts.'

Often you will hear *er/erm* at the beginning of a turn in response to a question. Here it means something like: 'Yes, I have heard your question and I intend to answer it. Please allow me a moment to work out my response.' It is misleading to think of *er*s and *erm*s as being without meaning or function. Hardly anything in language is there without a good reason.

2. The phrases *or something* and *sort of* are examples of what is often called **vague language**. Again, because spoken language is produced in real time, we sometimes don't have time to find the exact word or phrase that we want. We acknowledge this by using vague language. You will sometimes hear people, often teachers, complaining about this, saying that we should be more precise with the language we use. But vagueness is a common feature of spoken language. Everybody uses it – even the people who complain about it when they notice it being used by others. If you use a lot of vague language while delivering a prepared lecture, then you might rightly be criticised for not having prepared carefully enough. But if you are speaking spontaneously, you will certainly find yourself relying very often on vague language.

3. There is often repetition in spoken English. When we are reading we can go back over the script if we have not understood what has been said. Obviously we cannot reread spoken language, so the speaker often builds in redundancy by repeating parts of the message. In this case, the speaker even goes on to say, *I could go anywhere*, which is simply a further explanation of what he meant by *I was okay*.

4. The words *okay* and *chap* are much more likely to be found in informal speech than in writing. There are a number of words and phrases like this: *kids* for *children*; *guy, fellow, bloke* for *man*; *Mum and Dad* for *mother and father*; *loads of* or *heaps of* for *a lot of*. There will certainly be forms like this in the learners' first language too. We also have the word *yeah* which fulfils an interactive function, which is not found in written language.

5. The object of the verb (*the top of something like a lighthouse or something*) comes at the beginning of the sentence. Normally we would expect, *I don't mind the top of something like a lighthouse*. In spoken English we quite commonly put the topic of the sentence at the front and then go on to say something about it.

6. If by a sentence we mean something which starts with a capital letter and ends with a full stop, then the turn has been transcribed as five sentences. One of these is simply *Erm*. Presumably this is because there was a definite pause before and after it. Leaving aside *Erm* there are four sentences. But two of these: *Heights, er, at the top of a mountain, or a hill, where it's possible to fall*, and *But heights where you think you may be able to fall*, are not sentences according to the normal definition. Again this is not unusual in spoken English. There is no problem in under-standing these two non-sentences, and we certainly cannot describe them as ungrammatical. In fact when we are speaking we are not thinking of producing sentences at all, we are thinking of putting together units of meaning. Many of these units will be in the form of sentences. Some of them will not.

7. There is no verb. Again this utterance, *Absolutely frightening, that*, is not a sentence according to the criteria usually applied to written English. In spoken English we often leave out elements which can be easily understood. It is easy enough to expand this statement to its full form: *That was absolutely frightening*. This draws attention to the fact that the word *that*, which is the subject of the full form, is found not at the beginning, but at the end of the shortened form. This has the effect of highlighting the evaluation, *Absolutely frightening*, and of making it very prominent. The apparent ungrammaticality is in fact stylistically very effective.

8. Turn 6 contains the sentence, *I've never been as scared like that before or since*, which is certainly unusual and probably un-grammatical. The speaker was probably in two minds as to whether to say, *I've never been scared like that before*, or *I've never been as scared as that before*. Under the pressure of real time production he fell between two stools and produced a mixture of the two. Lapses of this kind are not unusual in spoken language. We have all heard people say things like *Not in the sleast*, a mixture between *Not in the least* and *Not in the slightest*.

9. CB is showing a polite interest in what BB has to say. Her inter-ventions should not be seen as interruptions. As we listen to someone speaking we are expected to comment briefly to show that we are listening with interest. We may do this with a single word like *really?*, *mm*, or *right*, but we often make an

evaluative comment like, *That's very frightening*, or *That's amazing* or *That's awful*.

10. There are two sentences beginning with *But* and four with *And*. This is very common in spoken but not in written language. In written language we often have complex sentences with subordinating conjunctions like *because* and *although*. In spoken discourse, particularly in informal spoken discourse, we often string utterances together with words like *and*, *but* and *so*, adding one item of information to another.

11. The last sentence of turn 1: *But heights where you think you may be able to fall*, is in fact not a sentence at all. Again this is not unusual in spoken language. We add items of information one after another in units which are usually, but by no means always, like the sentences of written English.

Of course not all spoken language is produced in real time. I referred above to a prepared lecture. There are occasions on which a spoken message is carefully prepared beforehand and may therefore have many of the characteristics of written language. It will use much less vague language and very few *er*s and *erm*s. There will be virtually no ungrammatical utterances, such as *I've never been as scared like that before*. But even when we have plenty of time for preparation we still need to take account of the fact that what we say in a lecture still has to be processed by listeners in real time. Good lecturers include interactive moves like *right* or *OK* or *now* to mark different stages in the development of their discourse. They give a careful introduction to what they have to say, and ensure that there is plenty of repetition so that their listeners have time to process what they are saying. So there will still be differences between a well prepared lecture and a chapter of a book on the same topic. The lecture comes somewhere between written English and spontaneous spoken English.

Most grammatical descriptions are based on the written language. This is not surprising. Written language is easily accessible. All you need to do is pick up a book and you have plenty of data to work with. Spoken data needs to be recorded and transcribed. This is a time-consuming business, but a full transcription is almost impossible. A full account of the grammar of spoken English would certainly include a description of intonation. Units of spoken language are marked by pauses and often by a falling intonation. It is a difficult and time-consuming process to include these in a transcript, and it requires specialist training to transcribe and read something intonationally. The

data is elusive and difficult to gather and as a result grammar is usually in effect the grammar of written English. When we describe the spoken form we tend to take the written form as standard and describe spoken language, rather as I have done above, in terms of how it differs from the written. This is odd because it treats the spoken form as though it were somehow derivative and unnatural. If anything, it is the written form which is derivative and unnatural. There are many languages which do not have a written form, but all languages have a spoken form. Certainly, almost all of us experience much more speech than we do writing.

We will go on to look at a number of the important differences between spoken English and the standardised written form, and then to propose teaching strategies to take account of these.

9.1.1 Spoken language appears to be untidy

Sometimes when we look at a written transcript spoken language appears to be untidy. It doesn't say exactly what it means and we have to work out what is being said. Here is an extract where two people are talking about the high prices that are sometimes paid for works of art[2]. They have just been talking about Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* which sold for around twenty million pounds while it is well-known Van Gogh had lived and died in total poverty:

SJ: … it was a vast amount. Mm.
EL: Mm. But it seems sad, that it's – it's a famous saying that a painter has to die before he er …
SJ: That's right. It's sad for Van Gogh.
EL: Yeah. Erm. But it's a pattern that just seems to repeat itself doesn't it, again and again? People while they're alive …
SJ: Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.
EL: I don't suppose there's enough distance to judge whether it's a great work of art or not.

EL says, *It seems sad that it's a famous saying that a painter has to die before he er … .* Of course he doesn't really mean that the fact that there's a famous saying is sad. He means that the fact that a painter has to die before his work is highly valued is sad. It is interesting, however, that SJ has no problem at all in understanding what EL is saying.

It is difficult to see how EL might have completed the sentence, *People while they're alive …,* but his intended meaning is clear enough.

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[2]This extract is taken from Willis & Willis, 1989.

If we were to write a report of this exchange we would have to do a good deal of tidying up:

> *It is often said that a painter has to die before his work is really appreciated. This was unfortunate for Van Gogh, and it is a pattern that is repeated again and again: people's work is not appreciated while they are alive.*

9.1.2 Spoken language omits words and phrases

One of the features of the discussion of Van Gogh, above, is that words and phrases are omitted. This is a common feature of spoken English. At the end of a good dinner the host or hostess might say *'Coffee anyone?'*. In the shared situation it is not difficult to interpret this as, *Would anyone like a cup of coffee?* But according to the description we have established that *Coffee anyone?* is not a clause. It does not have the structure N + V + ?. This is a common feature of spoken English. We often omit elements which can easily be understood from the context. This omission, which grammarians call **ellipsis**, is common in spoken English, particularly in conversation. Many questions in conversational English consist simply of one or two questions words: *What time? Where?* Parents with young children will be painfully familiar with the one word utterance *Why?* Someone who is accused of something may well respond: *Who, me?* Answers to questions are often similarly elliptical. When a teacher asks the class, *Is anyone absent?*, a student might well reply, *Yes, Jenny*. In the extract above, the sentence: *But heights where you think you may be able to fall*, is interpreted as: *But (I am frightened of) heights where you think you may be able to fall.* Spoken language often omits elements which can easily be retrieved from the context.

9.1.3 Spoken language is additive

In the discussion above about heights there are many occurrences of *and* linking one phrase or clause to the next. The effect is to build up the narrative, bit by bit in an additive fashion. This is particularly clear in: *And, you know, I sort of edged round. I couldn't go back through the same door. I edged round and managed to find the other door.* In the written form this would probably be something like: *Because I couldn't go back through the same door, I edged round and managed to find the other door.* In the spoken form we have a series of short statements and the listener builds up the picture of what happened.

In the sentence, *The top of something like a lighthouse or something I don't mind*, we have noted that there is a topic–comment structure.

The speaker begins by establishing the topic: *the top of something like a lighthouse* and then goes on to comment on this. This is a common feature of spoken English and, far from being accidental or 'wrong', is a useful way of organising information. The listener holds in mind the first item of information, in this case the topic, and then adds to it, interpreting whatever comes next in the light of what is held in mind.

This is very common not only in the structure of the clause, but also in the structure of the noun phrase. There is an excellent example in the CANCODE corpus: *His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents bought him a Ford Escort for his birthday*. In written English, this might well be a complex noun group, something like: *He has **a cousin in Beccles whose boyfriend's parents** bought him …*. These complex noun groups pack information very densely. They are difficult to put together in real time, and also difficult to process for understanding. Therefore, spoken English often simply strings items together instead of nesting them inside one another in a complex noun group.

His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents bought him a Ford Escort.

9.1.4 Spoken language is often repetitive

In the discussion on heights we noted the repetition in: *I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere.* This kind of repetition is necessary to give the listener time to process what is being said and sometimes to add emphasis. Because of this, repetition is a feature even of carefully prepared speech. If you listen to politicians speaking you will probably hear lots of repetition. British politicians, for example, often say things like: *It's good for business, it's good for the consumer, and it's good for Britain.*

9.1.5 Conversation is interactive

If there are two or more people involved in the production of a discourse they make use of mechanisms to organise turn-taking, and to ensure, as far as possible, that all participants are on the same track. Here is a short extract where two people are exchanging addresses[3]:

[3]This extract is taken from Willis & Willis, 1988.

1 DF: Okay. Can you give me your address? And your phone number? And I'll get it down here.
2 BG: Fifty-three …
3 DF: Yeah.
4 BG: Cleveland Square.
5 DF: Cleveland Square.
6 BG: London west two.
7 DF: Is that the postcode, or –?
8 BG: Yeah.
9 DF: Just west two?
10 BG: Yeah.
11 DF: All right. Have you got a phone number?
12 BG: Yes, it's two six two
13 DF: Two six two—
14 BG: o six one nine.
15 DF: o six one nine. So it's er, Bridget Green, fifty-three Cleveland Square, London, west two, two s- and the phone number two six two, o six one nine.
16 BG: That's right.

The two participants are constantly checking to see that information has been successfully transferred. They say things like *Yeah* and *That's right*, and they repeat what the other person has said to check it out. In an information exchange this kind of feedback is typical. In a story-telling exchange like that in Section 1 above we have *Mm*s and *Yeah*s from the listener to show attentiveness, and evaluative comments like *That's very frightening* or *That's amazing* or *Wow!* The important thing is that successful discourse is the responsibility of both participants. Even someone who is simply listening to a story is expected to play an active part. If you doubt this you might try a small experiment. Next time someone tells you an interesting story, try showing no reaction. Maintain the same facial expression and offer no comment on what they have to say. Before very long the story-teller will begin to look a bit worried and will probably stop and say something like: *Are you OK?*

9.1.6 Exchanges are formulaic

There are conventions governing interactions which are almost as important as the rules governing grammatical structure. In Italian, for example, thanking someone is always a two-part exchange, and the two parts are fixed:

A: *Grazie.*
B: *Prego.*

It is regarded as rude to omit a response after *grazie*. The usual response is *prego*. This may be replaced by *di niente* or just *niente*, but politeness always demands some acknowledgement. In English, however, there is no need to acknowledge a *thank you* if the service or favour is relatively trivial and straightforward. If I go into the newsagents and buy a newspaper, it is polite to say *thank you*, but I would not necessarily expect the newsagent to acknowledge this. If he did acknowledge he could use a range of utterances such as: *okay; right; cheers*. There is no formulaic response. If, however, the service or favour is more significant then some acknowledgement would be expected after *thank you*. There are a number of possible responses. English appears to be much more flexible than Italian in this respect. We would have an exchange like:

A: *Thanks.*
B: *Okay./That's okay./ That's fine./You're welcome./Not at all / Right.*

In learning a foreign language it is important to learn the formulae which govern basic exchanges and the forms of language which realise these exchanges. We have, for example:

Requests:
A: *Can / Could / Would you … please?*
B: *Certainly / Of course / Sure / I'm sorry … / I'm afraid not …*

A: *Would you mind ___ing?*
B: *Not at all / Certainly / Of course / I'm sorry … / I'm afraid not … / I can't I'm afraid …*

A: *Could I have … please?*
B: *Certainly / I'm sorry …*

Offers:
A: *Can / May / Could I …*
B: *Thanks / Thank you very much.*

A: *Would you like … / Would you like to …*
B: *Thanks / Thank you very much.*

Some interactions are embedded in others. For example:

A: *So, can you come round on Friday?*
B: *On Friday?* ⎫
A: *Yes.* ⎬ *(request for clarification)*
B: *Sure.* ⎭
A: *Thanks.*
B: *Okay.*

Here we have a request for clarification embedded in another request and followed by a thanking exchange. It is, then, possible to build up fairly complex interactions on the basis of formulaic exchanges.

There are a large number of formulae which exist to service interaction. Question tags play an interactive function. There is a host of responses, such as *I (don't) think so; so/neither do I; I'm not sure; of course*, which comment on previous utterances. Many of these, like *I think so*, need to be identified for learners. They are lexical phrases which cannot be generated from general grammatical rules.

9.1.7 Some speech acts are governed by typical routines

When someone tells a story, they usually follow a basic routine. They will normally begin with an utterance which gives an indication of what is to come. In the story about fear of heights, BB begins by saying: *I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere.* There is then a description of the situation: *But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says 'Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.'* Next comes a complicating factor, usually a problem: *I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet … with a rail about – perhaps eighteen inches high … and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something.* This is usually accompanied by some kind of evaluation: *I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.* Next comes a resolution: *And, you know, I sort of edged round. I couldn't go back through the same door. I edged round and managed to find the other door. And that's it.* Finally there is something which looks back on the experience and draws a conclusion: *Ever since then if I go up a ladder I'm scared stiff now. It really is, it's er, changed my whole life, you know. Absolutely frightening, that.*
   It is possible to link this routine to a number of formulaic utterances:

Opening: *I had a funny / dreadful / frightening experience once / the other day / a few years ago …*
Introducing a complicating factor: *Suddenly / And then …*
Evaluation: *It was awful / terrifying / really funny. Everybody laughed. / We were all terrified.*
Looking back: *So that's what happened. / So it was really frightening / funny.*

There is, therefore, a good deal of predictability in story-telling and a knowledge of how a narrative develops can be of great value to learners, both in producing and in understanding narratives.

If someone asks for directions to a particular place, the usual response is to look for some kind of orientation:

A: *Can you tell me how to get to the post office?*
B: *Well, you know the Town Hall on the High Street?*

As directions are given, they are accompanied by hints to help the listener check progress:

B: *You turn left at the Town Hall and you'll see a set of traffic lights at the end of that road.*

Directions are often followed by utterances checking that the information has been assimilated and these are acknowledged by the listener:

B: *You turn left at the Town Hall. Okay?*
A: *Right.*
B: *And you'll see a set of traffic lights at the end of the road. Right?*
A: *Traffic lights. Yeah.*

The final location of the post office is clearly marked and is clearly acknowledged by the listener:

B: *And the post office is right by the traffic lights on the left. You can't miss it.*
A: *Okay. Great. Thanks.*

Again, if these routine moves are familiar, this is a useful aid to both production and comprehension.

9.1.8 Spoken language is vague

Although we talk about vague language, this is actually misleading. In both spoken and written language we are as precise as we need to be and as we can manage to be. When speaking, there are a number of reasons why we are relatively imprecise. We sometimes do not have time to find the exact word we want. We find the following exchange in an interview situation:

BS: *And we raided the er, costumes department of the local little er – people that get together and do little plays and things like that.*
INT: *Drama society. Yes.*

Momentarily BS was unable to recall the term *drama society*, so had recourse to *people that get together and do little plays and things like that.*

English has a number of words and phrases which are used to refer to people and things when we can't recall the exact word: *stuff; people like*

that; *things like that*; *sort of …*; *kind of …*; *or something*; *thingy*; *what's his name*; *you know …* . I once transcribed a recording in which one participant, on being asked to describe something, said: *It was a – you know – a kind of a sort of a thing*. All languages have words and phrases like this, because all languages need vague language.

Sometimes it is not necessary to be precise. In the discussion about heights BB talks about: *a rail about – perhaps eighteen inches high …*, and *a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something*. Of course we sometimes use similar language in written English. In this chapter I have used vague words and phrases like: **several** *features which are common in spoken English* and **a number of** *the important differences between spoken English and the standardised written form*. But generally the purpose of written language is to transfer information, and in order to meet this purpose effectively we need to be precise. In spoken language the purpose is very often to make friends or to pass the time happily in the company of others. This is what is happening in the discussion about heights. In this kind of social exchange precision is less important than in an information exchange.

9.2 Teaching the spoken language

Some aspects of spoken language are very teachable. We can demonstrate typical exchanges, such as those used for offers or requests. In doing this we can focus on interactive markers like *right, okay, fine* and so on. We can point to the use of vague language and list ways of saying numbers: *about/around a hundred; at least a hundred; just over/under a hundred* and so on. All of these elements have an identifiable value which can, in principle, be made available to students.

As most spoken language is, of its very nature, spontaneous, some aspects are very difficult to teach. How can you explain to learners when they should put in *er* or *erm*? How do you teach them to say *mm* or *really?* at the appropriate time? What are the rules governing noun phrases like: *His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents …* . We cannot explain the grammar of spoken English, partly because it is so variable and partly because we do not yet have adequate descriptions to work from. We can, however, make students aware of the nature and characteristics of the spoken language. We can give them opportunities to analyse and to produce spontaneous language. Most important of all, we need to recognise the dynamic nature of spoken language. Language is the way it is because of the purposes it fulfils. The same applies to learner language.

One thing is sure: if we are to illustrate the grammar of spoken English we need samples of genuine spoken interaction. But this too creates problems. As we have seen, spoken language can be untidy with lots of false starts and instances of speakers talking over one another. This can make it difficult to process. Spontaneous spoken language is often delivered rapidly, unlike the carefully modulated language we hear in most language teaching courses. In the real world, the processing of spoken language often depends on shared knowledge and is consequently highly inexplicit. There are jokes about the married couple who engage in exchanges like:

A: *Have you er …?*
B: *Yes. Erm, yesterday.*
A: *And did they …?*
B: *They didn't say. I don't think they will, but they might … you know.*
A: *Right.*

Such exchanges are readily comprehensible to the couple involved, but completely incomprehensible to anyone else.

It is difficult, but not impossible to make spontaneous recordings for classroom use. Much of the data used here is taken from published language teaching materials (Willis, J. and D. Willis 1988). Native speakers working in a recording studio were asked to carry out a series of tasks. The same tasks were later used with learners in the classroom. Learners, for example, first listened to the recording in 9.1.5. They were told that this was a recording of native speakers finding one another's addresses and telephone numbers. This meant that learners had a clear idea of what they were listening for. The recording featuring in 9.1 can be introduced in the same way as the written text about the eight-year-old robber used to illustrate a task-based methodology in Chapter 3. Learners can be given pointer questions or hints to provide an outline for the story. It is, therefore, possible to devise techniques to make spontaneous recordings accessible to learners, even at an elementary level. Learners can then carry out a similar task themselves. Finally, with teacher guidance, they can look at features of the language used in the spontaneous recording. It is very important to find ways of making such spontaneous recordings available and accessible to learners. It may be that teachers will feel the need to work with a standardised or tidied-up version before exposing learners to spontaneously produced data. But until we find ways of using spontaneous data in the classroom it will not be possible to prepare students fully for the sort of language they will meet in the real world.

9.2.1 Applying appropriate standards

One of the most important things we can do as teachers is recognise that spoken and written language are different from one another in important ways, and to apply appropriate standards to the different forms. In the past I have tried to teach students to speak written English. I remember teaching picture composition lessons in which students produced stories like:

> **A.** *There was a little boy and he was cycling down the street and a car came round the corner. The driver didn't see the boy and he tried to stop, but it was too late …*

Given this kind of production I used to encourage students to produce a more measured text – something like:

> **B.** *One day, as a little boy was cycling down the street, a car suddenly came round the corner. Unfortunately the driver didn't see the boy coming towards him. Although the driver tried to stop it was too late …*

Version A has all the characteristics of a spoken narrative; version B is much more like a written narrative. Because I was not aware of the structure of spoken narrative, I tried to impose on my students a form of language which was much more appropriate to the written language. It would be extremely difficult, however, even for a native speaker, to produce a version like B without careful preparation. It is entirely unreasonable to expect learners to produce written language under the real-time constraints which apply to spoken language.

It is not unusual for teachers to insist on written forms, even where a short form would be more appropriate. Many teachers have a tendency to insist that students speak in complete sentences, and to encourage them to produce complex sentences with subordinate clauses, even though native speakers rarely produce spoken language like this.

9.2.2 Highlighting differences between spoken and written language

It is useful to encourage students to recognise that spoken language can be untidy and includes elements like false starts and *er*s and *erm*s. This can be done by looking at transcripts of natural language, like those shown earlier in this chapter, and devising exercises which focus on the differences between the spoken and written forms.

Teaching Activity 9.1: From spoken to written language

BB: Yeah. I was okay until I had a rather nasty experience about er, height. Until then I was okay. I could go anywhere. But er, I was er, on a lighthouse actually. We were being taken round it. We went up all the stairs and to the light, er, room. And then the chap says 'Oh, come on. Right, we'll go out here.' I went through the door. And I was on this very very narrow little parapet …

CB: Yeah.

BB: … with a rail about – perhaps eighteen inches high …

CB: Mm.

BB: … and then a sheer drop of about a hundred feet or something. I was absolutely petrified. I've never been as scared like that before or since.

CB: That's very frightening.

BB: And, you know, I sort of edged round. I couldn't go back through the same door. I edged round and managed to find the other door. And that's it. Ever since then if I go up a ladder I'm scared stiff now. It really is, it's er, changed my whole life, you know. Absolutely frightening, that.

Rewrite BB's story as though it were part of a letter. Begin with the words:

I have been frightened of heights ever since I had a frightening experience a few years ago …

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.1:

This exercise would be done after learners have already processed the dialogue for meaning as part of a task cycle. In order to produce a written version of the story, learners will have to do a lot of work on the spoken version.

Obviously they will need to cut out *er*s and *erm*s. They will change colloquial forms, like *I was okay* and *the chap*, to written forms, like *I was all right* or *I was not frightened* and *the man*. They will rewrite the ungrammatical form *I've never been as scared like that*. They will rewrite non-sentences, like *Absolutely frightening, that*. In making these adjustments they will be focusing on the differences between spoken and written language.

Teaching Activity 9.2: From written to spoken language

You are going to read a story which appeared in a popular magazine. The first sentence is:

> I never used to worry about heights until I had a rather frightening experience a few years ago.

The last sentence is:

> Now I get nervous even if I have to go up a ladder.

Here are some of the words and phrases from the story:

> Lighthouse keeper – small room – light – small door – parapet – low rail – eighteen inches – one hundred feet – much too frightened – back to the wall – other door – frightened of heights.

What do you think happened?

> I never used to worry about heights until I had a rather frightening experience a few years ago. We were on holiday by the coast, and we went to look round a lighthouse. The lighthouse keeper took us to the top of the tower and into the small room where the light was. Then he showed us through a small door. Suddenly I found myself on a tiny narrow parapet. In front of me there was a low rail, about eighteen inches high, and beyond that a sheer drop of about a hundred feet. I was petrified. I was much too frightened to turn round to go back through the original door. I kept my back to the wall and inched my way round the parapet till I came to the other door, and back into the room. I have never been so frightened in all my life. Since then I have been terrified of heights. Now I get nervous even if I have to go up a ladder.

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.2:

This is a prediction task after which you would encourage class discussion before showing the written text. You could then play the original recording as given in Teaching Activity 9.1 and show students the tapescript. You could ask them to identify features of spoken English from the tapescript and go on to lead a class discussion focusing on the aspects of spontaneous spoken language we highlighted in Task 9.1 in Section 9.1.

> Like Teaching Activity 9.1, this is an attempt to highlight differences between spoken and written forms. This exercise may be rather easier because it starts from the written form, which many students find easier to handle.

In highlighting differences between spoken and written forms it is important to make it clear that the forms are different because they fulfil different functions. It is not a matter of one form being superior to the other. In order to make this clear it may be useful to look at spoken forms in the learners' first language. The first language will certainly have noises which are equivalent to *er* and *erm*. It will certainly use vague language and units other than sentences. It is useful to look at transcripts of spoken language in the learners' first language to identify these features. If learners are not convinced that these are necessary features of spoken language, ask them to tell a short story or describe something in their own language without *er*s and *erm*s or hesitations, without vague language and in complete sentences. There is a game on BBC radio, called *Just a Minute*, in which celebrity guests are asked to speak for one minute on a topic without hesitation, repetition or deviation. Very few manage to do this.

In most transcripts you will find plenty of examples which illustrate the additive and repetitive nature of spoken language. The story above, for example, is basically a string of simple statements linked by the words *and* and *then*. It is important to point this out to students and to explain that this is typical of spoken language. In Section 9.1.3 we noted the additive structure of the noun phrase: *His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents bought him a Ford Escort for his birthday*. When looking at the structure of complex noun phrases in the written language it is useful to point out the looser structure of the spoken form. When we look at standard written forms it is often useful to look at alternative spoken forms.

Teaching Activity 9.3: Quantifiers and possessives

A. In spoken English we often put a quantifier after its noun:

People in London, some of them spend hours travelling to work.
Young children, most of them love making a noise.

Can you rewrite these sentences so that the quantifier is after the noun?

Most of my family live abroad.

A lot of the old houses were destroyed.
Some of the spectators were attacked.

B. In spoken English possessives are often expressed like this:

Instead of saying: *Her neighbour's dog*, we can say: *Her neighbour his dog.*
Instead of saying: *His daughter's neighbour's dog*, we can say: *Her daughter her neighbour his dog.*
Instead of saying: *My friend Peter's daughter's neighbour's dog*, we can say: *My friend Peter his daughter her neighbour his dog.*

What could you say instead of the following?

my cousin's wife
my cousin's wife's mother
my cousin's wife's mother's boss
Mary's teacher
Mary's teacher's husband
Mary's teacher's husband's partner

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.3:

There is no need to spend a lot of time on exercises like this. But it is important for learners to recognise alternative spoken forms.

9.2.3 Demonstrating the interactive nature of spoken language

Teaching Activity 9.4: Listening to interaction

Look at this transcript of a dialogue:

DF: Okay. Can you give me your address? And your phone number?
BG: Fifty-three, Cleveland Square. London west two.
DF: Have you got a phone number?
BG: Yes, it's two six two o six one nine.

Now listen to this longer version:

DF: Okay. Can you give me your address? And your phone number? And I'll get it down here.
BG: Fifty-three …
DF: Yeah.
BG: Cleveland Square.
DF: Cleveland Square.

BG: London west two.
DF: Is that the postcode, or –?
BG: Yeah.
DF: Just west two?
BG: Yeah.
DF: All right. Have you got a phone number?
BG: Yes, it's two six two
DF: Two six two—
BG: o six one nine.
DF: o six one nine. So it's er, Bridget Green, fifty-three Cleveland Square, London, west two, two s- and the phone number two six two, o six one nine.
BG: That's right.

(Here the teacher should play the recording without showing a transcript.)

What differences are there between the two versions? Can you rewrite the first version so that it is more like real spoken language?

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.4:

An exercise like this will certainly focus on interactive moves like repetition and the use of *Yeah* to show that the message has been received. It would be too much to expect learners to reproduce the full version exactly. You might build up to the writing exercise by playing the full version once then asking students to identify differences, then playing it again before asking them to produce their version. You can finish the exercise by showing them the full transcript.

Teaching Activity 9.5: Evaluations

Look at these exchanges:

A: Hey, I've just heard I've passed all my exams.
B: …
C: I've just heard that Jack has failed all his exams.
D: …

Choose comments suitable for B and comments suitable for D:

All of them? That's awful – Congratulations – That's terrible – That's great – Great – Oh dear, I'm sorry – That's marvellous – Wonderful – Well done.

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.5:

This exercise focuses on evaluations which, as we have seen, play an important part in spoken interaction. You might usefully ask learners what evaluations they might employ in their own language. Once you have established the idea of evaluations, you can take note of them as they occur in the language learners are exposed to.

Teaching Activity 9.6: Some discourse markers
WELL:
1. You use *well* to show you have come to the end of a conversation:

    Well, I think it's time for lunch.
    Well, I'm afraid I have to go now.

2. You often use *well* to preface an answer to a question to show that you have heard the question and are considering your answer. You often do this if you are unable to answer a question directly:

    A: What time is it?
    B: Well, it must be nearly time for lunch.

    A: Who is that?
    B: Well, it's not the manager.
    Well, I don't know really.
    Well, I'm not sure.

3. You use *well* to change or correct something you have said:

    He's nearly seventy now. Well, he's certainly over sixty.
    I'm going home now. Well, in a few minutes.

4. You use *well* to add a comment to something or to introduce a story you want to tell:

    You know Mrs. Brown? Well, she's got a new job.
    I went to George's last night. Well, there was nobody there, so …

What would you use for *well* in your own language?

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.6:

Words like *well, right, okay* and *so* are very common in spoken English. It is difficult to say what they mean but it is possible to show how they are used. The best way of getting learners to think about their use is to relate them to the first language.

9.2.4 Building up formulaic exchanges

Teaching Activity 9.7: Functional dialogues

Can you arrange these sentences to make a short dialogue?

What time?
I'm sorry, I can't. I have a computer class.
What about Friday?
Thursday?
About seven.
Sure. That's fine.
Can you come round one evening?
Sure. When?

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.7:

This is a short problem-solving activity, to be done in pairs. It focuses on the formulae to do with requests and asking for supplementary information. It is important to provide the problem-solving element in order to oblige students to pay careful attention to the wording of the dialogue.

There is more than one way of putting the dialogue together. After learners have completed the task they can read out their dialogues and compare solutions.

Finally, they can be asked to act out their dialogue from memory. An alternative would be to ask one student to produce the first utterance and then select another student at random to reply, then another student, and so on until the whole dialogue is built up.

The exercise can be varied by offering alternative realisations of the moves:

(I'm sorry, I can't / I'm afraid not / Sorry) I have a computer class.
(Can you / Could you / Do you think you could) come round one evening?

Alternatively learners can be asked to rewrite the dialogue using their own variations. Finally, learners can listen to a version of the same exchange, possibly one incorporating plausible additions to the original:

A: Can you come round one evening?
B: Sure. When?
A: Thursday?
B: *Thursday?* I'm sorry, I can't. I have a computer class.
A: *Oh.* What about Friday?
B: *Friday?*
A: *Yeah.*
B: *I don't know.* What time?
A: About seven.
B: *Seven? Sure.* That's fine.
A: *Okay, thanks.*
B: *Right.*

They may be given a written version without the additional, italicised utterances, and asked to identify the additions as they listen. The important thing at each stage is to provide a problem-solving element to provide a reason for carrying out the activity.

9.2.5 Establishing typical routines

Teaching Activity 9.8: Narrative structure

Listen to these stories again. Write down the following:

- the summarising sentence that comes at the beginning of the story;
- any evaluations;
- the summarising sentence that comes at the end of the story.

BG: I once had a dreadful journey home. My parents live in Sussex – and I remember catching a train once on a Friday night to go home, go down to Sussex, and it usually takes about an hour and I was very tired and I fell asleep half-way and ended up in Hastings which is about two and a half hours, two hours, erm, which was really annoying, 'cause it meant I had to wait for another train to come back again. It was awful.

JV: A friend of mine had a similar experience on a Greenline bus after an office party. So you can imagine that he went to sleep and the Greenline bus went all the way to its terminus at one end, and then all the way back to the other one and was on its third trip …

BG: Oh no!

JV: … before they finally woke him up and said 'Are you sure – where are you supposed to be going to?' So that journey certainly went wrong.

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.8:

These are both stories which the students have heard before. They may have just finished working on the stories, or they may have heard them some time ago. The purpose here is to highlight the way stories are built into a conversation and the way they are structured. You may then go on to ask how these stories might be introduced in the students' own language, and how they might be summarised at the end. Go on to list possible story introductions and conclusions in the L1 and in English.

You can carry out similar exercises with other routines, such as asking for directions, which was discussed in Section 9.1.7. Because the elements in these routines serve basic communicative functions they tend to be similar in most languages. It is, for example, difficult to imagine a language which did not structure the giving of directions with orientation and checking moves.

9.2.6 Focusing on vague language

Teaching Activity 9.9: Vague language

How many examples of vague language can you find in these exchanges:

A: *How far is it to Edinburgh?*
B: *I don't know. About a hundred miles I suppose.*
A: *A hundred miles. Mm. How long does it take to drive?*
B: *Well, a couple of hours or so. It depends on the traffic. Yeah, not more than a couple of hours.*

*

> A: *What does it look like?*
> B: *Well it's sort of brownish. It's got a handle thing on the side. And it's about the same size as a smallish suitcase.*

Commentary on Teaching Activity 9.9:

Vague language is obviously very important for learners. They can use it to make up for vocabulary items they do not know or are not sure of. There are a few vague language items which can be used in a range of contexts. The phrases *sort of* and *kind of* can be used with virtually any adjectival expression. *About* and *or so* can be used with numbers and quantities, as can expressions like *just under, just over, not more / less than*. The suffix *-ish* can be added to colours and to common adjectives like *big*, *small*, *old* and *young*. If we are not sure of the right word for something we can choose a similar word and add the word *thing*. So a computer monitor can be described as *a television thing* or *a sort of television thing*. It is not difficult to equip learners with a good basis for vague language. Once you have done this it is useful to point out other examples of vague language as they occur.

9.3 Summary

It is clear that spontaneous spoken language differs in important ways from the standard written form. Many of these differences will be similar to differences between written and spoken forms of the learners' own language. It will certainly be useful to make constant comparisons between the characteristics of spoken English and the spoken form of the learners' first language. It would also be useful for learners to have a general understanding of the nature of spoken discourse and the differences between spoken and written forms. One of the problems we face in the classroom is finding something to talk about and something to read about. One of the obvious things to talk about is language itself. There is a strong case for introducing the study of language as part of the subject matter of the language classroom, and a principled comparison between L1 and L2 should be part of this discussion.

In Section 9.2 I acknowledged the difficulties of providing spontaneous spoken data in the language classroom. But I also argued that it is a priority for the ELT profession to find a way of making this kind of data available and accessible. We will still be largely dependent on

grammars based on standard written forms. But once we have made spontaneous spoken language available in the classroom we can begin to work systematically at introducing learners to the characteristics of spoken language in the ways proposed here.