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## **SPEAKING FOR UNDERSTANDING: RULES FOR TEACHERS\***

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Adrian Johnson

I wish to begin my remarks this morning by referring not to rules of speaking, but to one very useful rule of not speaking. It was proposed by Abraham Lincoln. He said, "It is better to say nothing and look like a fool, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." Alas, a month ago when I was informed about this Conference, I failed to remember this very sound advice, and allowed myself to be overpersuaded by the charming staff of Pusat Bahasa. Indeed, they have freely admitted that "conned" would be more appropriate than "overpersuaded"

I must confess, however, that in addition to the persuasive powers of Professor Dato' Asmah and her colleagues, there was another influence at work. This was a mixture of my own fascination with many aspects of Applied Linguistics, and my conviction that many teachers are less effective than they should be because they are not sufficiently aware of the way the language works, and do not use it to best effect. I am intrigued by the rule-governed nature of language, and convinced that our understanding of the rules of speaking should be more effectively exploited in teacher training.

This conviction about the language skills needed for effective teaching needs to be explained. As I was thinking about this issue, I read three articles in the *New Straits Times* about Malaysian teachers. I should stress that much of what they said would be true of teachers in many parts of the world, including Britain. The first one included some comments by Tan Sri Datuk Wira Abdul Rahman Arshad, Director-General of Education. He is reported to have said, "We are now, concentrating on the child. Child-oriented teaching means that we are teaching the child how to learn and think. The breadth of knowledge has widened so much that teachers cannot give children everything. At best, the teacher can equip the child with the skills to grasp and understand that knowledge. Because of this, teaching methods must change. Teachers cannot prescribe any more; they have to be more inventive." I ask you to note in particular the emphasis on equipping the child "with the skills to grasp and understand knowledge."

The third article in the *New Straits Times* series, however, included comments made by students about their teachers. One said, "I get fed up

when the teacher talks and we don't understand a word she is saying. If we ask her to back-track, she will get angry and accuse us of not paying attention." Another commented. "It is so irritating when the teacher makes no effort to remember the student's name. Sometimes they point at us and say, "Hey, you," or "You there, come here." And a third student spoke of the mild rebuke she received when she asked her teacher a question. The teacher said. "Go and read it up yourself." And another student was promptly silenced when she spoke up in class. Her teacher said. "I teach, you listen!"

I should make it clear that the last article also included words of praise for teachers who cared about their subjects and their pupils. But the key issue is clearly the gap that exists in some classrooms between what we are aiming at in education, and what we are in some cases, at least, actually achieving. As the articles make clear, there are many reasons for this gap: some teachers have been given inadequate training, some lack a real interest in their job; some find the pressures on them too great; and so on. One reason which is not mentioned, however, is that many teachers have an inadequate grasp of the rules of speaking which are a feature of effective teaching for understanding. I am convinced that these rules are crucially important. And that is why I landed myself in this predicament of trying to speak about them this morning!

Although these "rules for speaking" related to interactions between teachers and pupils have been extensively studied, it is not surprising, given the complex nature of these interactions, that the patterns that have been observed in them have been formulated and described in several different ways. But I believe that there is a general point which can be made about those classroom interactions through which a teacher is attempting, as Tan Sri Datuk Wira Abdul Rahman Arshad has said, "to equip the child with the skills to grasp and understand knowledge."

I think I can best illustrate this point by referring to two conversations I have had in Kuala Lumpur. The first occurred nearly thirty years ago. My wife and I had invited our Chinese teacher to dinner. He had been born in Peking and spoke only one dialect of Chinese, i.e. Mandarin. His wife had been born in Malaya, and her mother-tongue was Foochow. Living in Kuala Lumpur at that time was an American teacher who had previously lived and worked in Foochow. We knew her and so we invited her to meet our teacher and his wife. When we explained their linguistic backgrounds, our American friend said. "Oh, that should be interesting, because I can use only formal speech in Mandarin, and small talk in Foochow." The explanation of this remark was that she had learned Mandarin formally in the classroom and then used it formally to teach. But outside the classroom, she had had to learn Foochow for everyday communication. She could

"chat" in Foochow, but "lecture" in Mandarin. The second conversation took place about two years ago. Once again it was with a teacher, but this time a Malaysian Chinese. She had been English-educated. But, of course, she now uses Bahasa Malaysia in her teaching. So I asked her how easy she finds this to be. Her answer fascinated me. She said: "I have no difficulty in lecturing on my subject; but I find I have an inadequate natural grasp of ordinary, everyday, informal language to be able to teach as I used to in English. You see, I am not comfortable about chatting with students about my subject, because I am not sure if I am using the right kind of informal phrases."

Both these stories suggest that lecturing or expounding on a subject demands a control of formal language, whereas classroom discussion about a subject requires a special command of informal language. The general point I wish to make therefore is that the "rules of speaking" which apply when a teacher is seeking to encourage understanding and active learning are related to the use of certain kinds of informal language. As I hope to make clear, I believe this informal language is related to methods of questioning and responding to answers.

In saying this, of course, I am making assumptions about the effectiveness of certain styles of teaching. It is obvious, of course, that classroom interactions primarily should have a pedagogic structure. The way a teacher uses language depends on pedagogical method as well as linguistic competence. It is necessary therefore for me to say something about the way the linguistic and pedagogic structures are interwoven.

Several well-known schemes are used to structure lessons which are "child-oriented", i.e. which are specifically designed to lead pupils to an understanding of a subject, rather than just a knowledge of it. This morning, I can do no more than refer to two of these schemes. The first has been used extensively in Britain at both primary and secondary level, particularly for mathematics and science. It can be summarized in a simple diagram, and is given in Appendix A.

The crucial point to be noted is that this pedagogic approach has discussion at its centre. This means that it depends on the teacher's command of conversational skills, not least those related to questioning, suggesting, directing thought, etc. The rules of speaking for teachers aiming at understanding are therefore very likely to deal with these particular skills.

The second pedagogic approach I wish to refer to is that of Benjamin Bloom. This is so well-known that I hardly need to remind you of its main features, but I will do so briefly simply to underline the connection between the pedagogic purpose and the linguistic structures that are related to fulfilling that purpose. (And it should be noted that speakers' intentions determine rules of speaking.)

<i>Cognitive objectives</i>	<i>Some key words in questions related to these objectives</i>
1. Knowledge	define, list, name, who, what, when, how, etc
2. Comprehension	explain, translate, compare, put in your own words, etc
3. Application	solve, use, calculate, how, which, demonstrate, etc
4. Analysis	why, analyse, evidence, contrast, identify, infer, etc
5. Synthesis	write, suggest, plan, construct, put together, draw up, etc
6. Evaluation	assess, decide, conclude, opinion, on what basis, etc

Although some educationists consider that this analysis of cognitive objectives and the intellectual skills related to it has definite weaknesses or inadequacies, I doubt if there are any who would not agree about the importance of the development of these intellectual skills. The whole of modern science, and indeed the scientific approach to any subject, depends on comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Equally, I am convinced that these skills are most likely to develop under the guidance of a teacher who has definite linguistic skills of questioning, responding, reacting, probing, guiding, encouraging, etc. I am personally convinced that a firm grasp of knowledge about a subject and an understanding of it involves some form of debate. This debate occurs within the mind of an individual, and also between the individual and others. The linguistic skills involved in child-oriented education are those related to informal debate and the rules of speaking are those which govern controlled yet open conversation of the special kind associated with child-oriented teaching.

At this point I would like to put these rules of speaking in context with other linguistic rules. The amazing complexity of these linguistic rules is shown in diagrams which attempt to summarize linguistic phenomena. For example, Appendix B gives a diagram from Terry Winograd's book *Language as a Cognitive Process*.

The rules that could be listed under the various headings, phonological, syntactic, semantic, etc are of course deduced through a process of idealization. This involves the procedures of regularization, standardization, and decontextualization. This last word is to be carefully noted. The kind of rules of speaking which we are considering at this Conference are

certainly not decontextualized. This means, that they may seem to lack the precision of the rules listed in Winograd's diagram. Yet, as Firth said, "Language is fundamentally a way of behaving and making others behave," so the linguist must concern himself ultimately with the verbal process in the context of situation." The rules of speaking which we can observe from discourse, therefore, deserve the attention we are attempting to give to them, even if we cannot produce neat diagrams to illustrate the way they are supposed to operate.

Let me refer again to Firth's statement. He spoke of language being fundamentally a way of behaving and making others behave. This clearly has the most direct implication for effective teaching: the way a teacher speaks influences very strongly the linguistic behaviour of the pupils he or she is teaching. That is why it is important to attempt to detect patterns in the linguistic interactions between teachers and pupils to see if there are any regularities particularly associated with the kind of teaching that encourages children to think for themselves. These patterns or regularities could then perhaps be summarized in some useful rules of speaking.

As I have mentioned already, there are several well known descriptive systems of these patterns of classroom interaction. Each of them is worth a study. But this morning I have time to refer to only two of them, one briefly and the other in more detail. The first was proposed by Bellack who suggested that interactions could be described "moves". I take it that this concept of "move" is derived from a game like chess. One player makes a move which then leads to a move by another, and so on. It is a very powerful and useful concept for linguistic interactions. The four moves which Bellack uses are: structuring; soliciting; responding; and reacting. The teacher is responsible for structuring the classroom discussion by, for example, focusing the attention of the class on a topic. There are well-known and special ways of using language to direct attention to particular themes. Having focused on the theme, the teacher will then pass on information about it, and this also is part of the structuring of the lesson. The teacher will then seek to engage the pupils' active thought about the theme by soliciting some response from them about it. This obviously involves a whole range of techniques of asking questions. The next stage in the classroom interaction will be for the pupil to answer or comment; and then the teacher will react to this response - modifying, clarifying, expanding, seeking further comment, and so on. Bellack concluded, from his investigations of classroom interactions that teachers' utterances and pupils' responses occurred in definite cycles, and these could be analysed using the four moves into not more than twenty-one different patterns. The frequency of these patterns in any lesson depended on teaching styles.

The other system of analysis I would like to refer to this morning has been used by John Sinclair and his collaborators. One main reason why I have chosen to comment on this system is the way Sinclair has attempted to show how discourse analysis is interrelated with both pedagogy and grammar. His proposal is summarized in a simple diagram.

<i>Non-linguistic organisation</i>	<i>Discourse</i>	<i>Grammar</i>
Course		
Period	Lesson	
Topic	Transaction	
	Exchange	Sentence
	Move	Clause
	Act	Group
		Word
		Morpheme

As is obvious, each of these models is composed of "ranks", i.e. the unit on one level is made up of units from the rank below. For example, words are composed of morphemes; lessons are composed of transactions, etc. There is also a horizontal relationship. Topics in the pedagogic system are realized by transactions in the discourse system, and exchanges are idealized as sentences in the syntactic system.

Before I say more about Sinclair's system of analysing classroom discourse, it is necessary to emphasize how peculiar this discourse is. In ordinary conversations, topics arise and are pursued by several people; there is usually no one person guiding how the topic is considered. Several people may speak at once; new topics may arise and take over the attention of the speakers. And so on. Of course, conversations of this kind have structures, or they would simply be incoherent. This is why various rules of speaking have been proposed as means of analysing everyday conversations, but classroom discourse is quite different. To start with, the teacher chooses the topic; she decides also how it should be dealt with, when another topic should be pursued, how to handle misunderstandings, reinforce new insights, and so on. She might even choose to use a short silence in which pupils may think for themselves. Obviously, there are other "rules" which teachers and pupils observe so that classroom interactions are orderly and productive. One speaker at a time; the teachers can take over the discussion at any time; the teacher decides who should talk; and so on. These also could be referred to as rules of speaking, but they

are obviously of a different kind from those proposed by Bellack and Sinclair. The latter were used to elucidate how the linguistic behaviour of the teacher specifically influences the linguistic behaviour of the pupil. The more general rules about the conventions of who speaks and when in a classroom are of a broader and more general kind, though obviously also related to the purpose behind any classroom interaction. They underline the way in which the teacher can control classroom interactions; but also, they illustrate how the teacher can dominate these interactions to the point of there being little or no active participation by students. As mentioned earlier, some teachers assume they teach and pupils just listen.

normal conventional classroom procedures may come to inhibit free participation by students. This in turn underlines the need for the teacher to use both the more general "rules of speaking" which will maintain the coherence of the discourse, and also other "rules of speaking" of the kind identified by Bellack and Sinclair. In other words, the teacher must control the discourse with and between students and actively encourage it. He or she must know how to encourage a student to ask a question, make a suggestion or observation, and so on. The dynamics of child-centred classrooms are those of student participation rather than passivity.

I am, of course, fully aware of the cultural factors and sociological factors which strongly influence the likelihood of free participation by students. Just as much as discourse analysis of classroom interactions overlaps with pedagogy, so it also overlaps with sociology. In some societies, it is much more customary for classroom interactions to be subject-centred rather than child-centred. Students are expected to listen and absorb but not to question or discuss. Other strong influences are, of course, such matters as status differences, age differences, sex, the use of a second as against a first language, and so on. Since this is a Conference of the Asian Association of National Languages, these factors should not be forgotten. I fully realize that I am speaking in English about classroom interactions in English, and typically interactions which have over recent years followed pedagogic methodologies which have been most common in the West. But I firmly believe that the pedagogic procedures I have referred to, such as those related to Bloom's analysis of cognitive objectives, are applicable anywhere and that they are particularly appropriate for encouraging students to think for themselves, whatever their cultural or linguistic background. This means that I am also convinced that very similar rules of speaking will most probably apply to whatever language is used. These rules will simply have different realizations. In saying this, I am not underestimating the significant influences of cultural or linguistic background. These can be very real and I would be fascinated to learn what members of the Conference from different cultures and different mother-

tongues think about the ways these cultures and languages influence rules of speaking in an interactive classroom. I would be surprised, however, if Sinclair's system would not provide valuable insights into the dynamics of classroom interactions whatever language is being used and wherever the classroom might be.

In Sinclair's rank scale model, he suggests that lessons are typically made up of a series of transactions and that the boundaries of these transactions are marked by "frames" He has identified four very common frames in English: they are the words "well", "right", "now", and "good" He points out that these words in this context have a special function: they indicate that the teacher is about to focus on a new topic. For example, to begin the lesson the teacher might say: "Right. Today we shall be thinking about tin production in Malaysia." Or in the middle of the same lesson the teacher might say: "Good. Let us now consider tin mining in Perak." Clearly, the teacher must have the linguistic skills to give a lesson a clear, logical sequence. It is intriguing that a lesson in English, according to Sinclair's analysis, is given this structured sequence by the use of just a few simple words acting as "frames" for the ordered series of transactions. I would, of course, be glad to learn what frames there are, if any, in Bahasa Malaysia. Reflecting on my own experience of teaching in English, I believe that Sinclair has identified a definite feature of structuring in a lesson conducted in English. It seems very likely that there must be some analogous way in which lessons are framed in other languages.

Sinclair goes on to suggest that between frames the teacher conducts transactions and that these are structured also. They are made up of exchanges. These are intended to inform, direct or elicit. Exchanges are realized as sentences and a typical exchange has three "moves", for example, the teacher first elicits a response from the student; the student replies, and then the teacher gives feedback. The teacher must obviously have the linguistic skills to elicit responses from pupils effectively and then to react appropriately to the replies. It was these skills, which my Chinese friend felt she lacked.

It should be noted, of course, that although "eliciting" is usually realized by an interrogative, this is not always the case. For example:

"Can you tell me which countries produce tin?"

Or "I would like you to say which countries produce tin."

Or "Name the countries which produce tin."

Likewise, "directing" is not always realized as an imperative sentence; nor is informing always associated with declarative sentences. The use of these three different structures for different purposes is not, of course, restricted to the classroom, but I believe the patterns are peculiar to classroom usage, and I suggest that teacher-trainers should be aware of this and should ensure that their students are given the appropriate linguistic training.

Sinclair goes on to suggest that "moves" are composed of "acts". An act is the minimal contribution to an exchange. Some moves are single acts. For example, in a classroom there are well established "acts" which are used by the teachers to nominate which student is invited to respond to a question, or make a contribution to the discussion. Some, of course, are non-linguistic, for example, a movement of the hand or a nod of the head. Sinclair has proposed that there are 22 types of acts which serve to initiate succeeding discourse activity, or to respond to previous comments, questions and so on. Once again, a teacher should have a competent command of this level of discourse activity.

The essential point to note about the analysis proposed by Sinclair, and indeed that also proposed by Bellack, is that it is based on two fundamental assumptions or educational tenets: one, students learn most efficiently when they are encouraged to participate in what goes on in the classroom, and two, teachers should stimulate powers of thought in their students by questioning, guiding, challenging, probing the knowledge, experience, ideas, etc of the students. This is what is meant by child-oriented education or by "the interactive classroom". This is why I find Sinclair's system to be valuable as an outline of the rules of speaking which are related to teaching for understanding. I believe that a teacher seeking to induce understanding of the subject would be well advised to follow rules of this kind at all levels of speaking and over the full range of intellectual skills which his or her pupils are capable of acquiring. Using Bloom's taxonomy as a useful basis, Craig Kissonock and Peter Lyotsum suggest that when the teacher is engaged in eliciting responses, the realization of this process (i.e. the realization of the rule) will typically involve different sets of words at each level of intellectual skill. In teaching the trainee teacher to master the rules of speaking for understanding, it is likely that the emphasis in practice will be on assisting the trainee to gain a command of the typical realizations of the rules, rather than to attempt any understanding of the abstract linguistic processes. This, of course, is analogous to most learning. One can learn to swim without knowing Archimedes' principle.

Some of the key words which are often associated with the various levels of intellectual skills were shown in the diagram I have used to

summarize Bloom's taxonomy. These are obviously specific to English, but I think it is likely that equivalent lists could be prepared for any language.

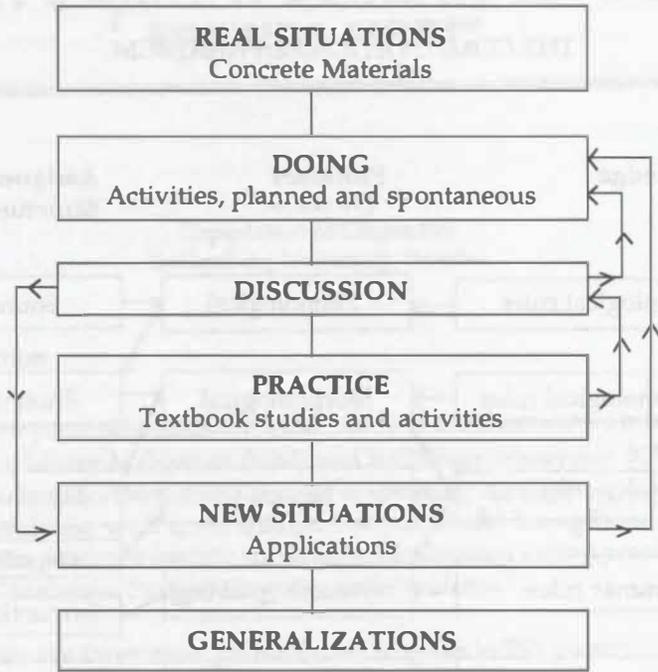
I must confess that when I reached this point in preparing my talk, I suddenly felt that I had merely strung together a set of very obvious observations. If this is so, I take comfort in the story of the little boy who was watching a television programme about space travel. His mother was with him and she was startled by his response to a remark in the programme that someday man would perhaps be able to travel into deep space. The little boy said, "But Mummy, I thought we already were in deep space."

In studying linguistics, we are quite often in mental deep space. If we can detect patterns in this space, we can better understand human discourse, including that typical of a classroom. And this understanding will, I hope, assist teachers in their vital task of teaching for understanding.

#### Notes

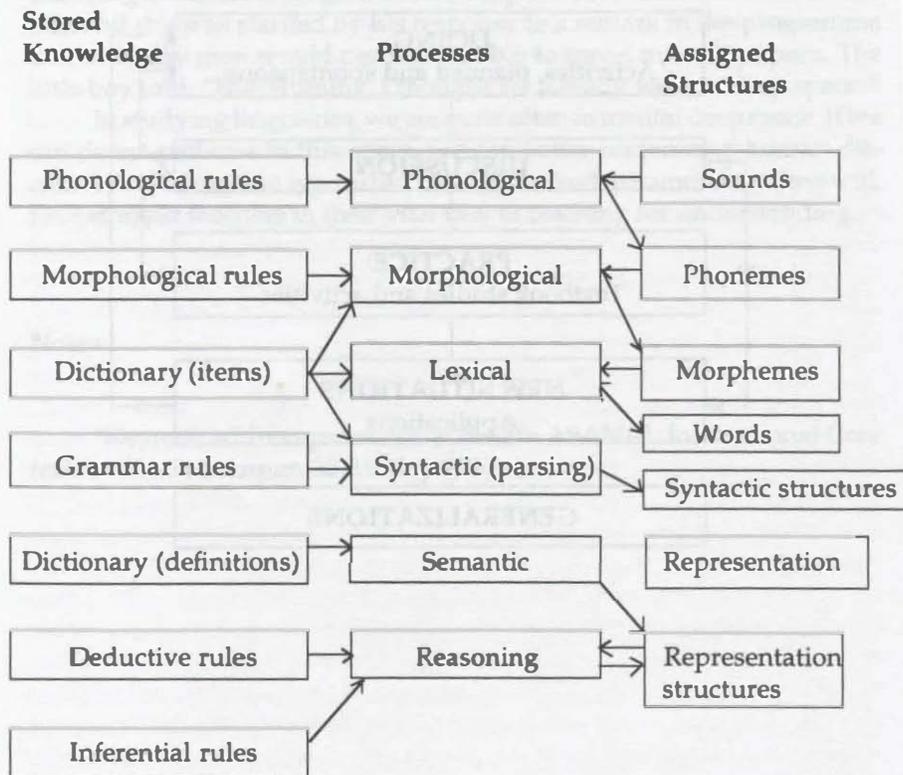
\*Keynote address presented at the 8th ASANAL International Conference Kuala Lumpur, 28-31 May 1990.

APPENDIX A



## APPENDIX B

## THE COMPUTATIONAL PARADIGM



A stratified model of language comprehension.