Invent content, not language. Meaningful interaction and natural language use in the classroom

Szilvia Szita – Dr. Katalin Pelcz
University of Pécs

Introduction

This article presents the basic principles for a methodology that allows students to participate in *meaningful small-group interactions* in the classroom and to *produce, at least partly, close-to-native utterances* at the same time. The methodology draws on the results of the corpus-based linguistic research that has shown that native speakers are far from original in their use of language, but, on the contrary, they tend to use large amounts of prefabricated linguistic units. Paul Davis and Hanna Kryszewska in their book on teaching lexical chunks give an explanation for this phenomenon, suggesting that these "likely utterances" serve to ensure successful conversation, "reliev[ing] cognitive effort and increas[ing] naturalness" (Davis-Kryszewska: 2012). Language learners, however, are not necessarily aware of these linguistic items unless they are pointed out to them. According to Michael Lewis, they "need input rich in prefabricated chunks, which they notice as items deserving special attention" (Lewis: 1997).

On the following pages we will discuss various possibilities for the implementation of this approach focusing on two areas:

- We will examine a range of tools textbooks can provide to promote the use of natural language[1] in meaningful communicative situations.
- We will examine how teachers can engage their students in meaningful interactions around textboook exercises and present them the necessary linguistic tools to conduct their discussions, at least partly, in a native-like manner.

In both cases, we will look at dialogues and narratives.

Language panels in a textbook: Dialogues and narratives

As mentioned above, utterances produced by native speakers contain a large amount of prefabricated language (Michael Hoey, 2005). Thus, study materials that claim to provide effective tools for language learning need to make learners aware of the importance of prefabricated linguistic units as this will increase the accuracy and the naturalness of their language use.

For example, an exercise in which learners should ask one another about a topic in a more or less spontaneous manner, it is not necessary to rely on unrehearsed language only. Textbooks can provide model dialogues with multiple variations that present several ways in which native speakers would solve the given task. A typical dialogue box with variations for a conversation around "Hobbies" at A1 level can look like this: Variation 1: *A: Szeretsz/szeret úszni? B: Az az igazság, hogy nem szeretek sportolni. És te?/És Ön? A: Én igen. Imádom a vizet. / Variation 2: A: Szeretsz/szeret úszni? B: Igen, nagyon. És te? / És Ön? A: Én is. Szeretem a vizet.* (A: *Do you like swimming?* B: *To tell you the truth, I have never liked sports. What about you?* A: O *yes, I do. I love water.* Variation 2: *A: Do you like swimming? B:*

---

[1] By *natural language* we mean utterances native speakers are likely to use in the given situation.

Yes, I love it. What about you? A: Me too. I love water.) (Examples taken from *MagyarOK* A1+.)

Similarly, a large variety of linguistic items can be presented when students are to build their own narratives around a theme. An exercise in which they are invited to tell about their weekend can contain a list of items from which they can choose to express their thoughts in well-formed, natural-sounding utterances, e.g.: *Nem csináltam semmi különöset. (I did not do anything special) / Beszélgettem a barátnőmmel. (I had a chat with my girlfriend) / Telefonáltam a szüleimnek. (I talked to my parents on the phone) / Az egész hétvégét a családommal töltöttem. (I spent my whole weekend with my family) / Találkoztam egy ismerősömmel. (I met a friend of mine)* etc. (Examples taken from *MagyarOK* A2+, Chapter 4.)

Naturally, one cannot pretend to be able to predict the course of an entire conversation or narrative text, *the quality of the language to formulate content* can be, however, significantly improved if learners are given a large variety of prefabricated linguistic items. Learners are, in fact, more willing to take risks and experiment with the language to express their thoughts if they know that their utterances will be, at least partly, accurate (Ellis: 2008).

Meaningful interaction "around" textbook exercises: Dialogues and narratives
Communicative situations such as negotiations to give one example, can be created around any textbook exercise. Sentences such as *Kezded? / Te jössz. / Nem tudom. Segítesz? / Erre nem emlékszem.* (*Do you want to start? / It's your turn. / I don't know. / Can you help? / I don't remember this*) etc. can be integrated in even the simplest drill-like exercise to train not only one specific aspect of the language but also communicative skills and frequently used language panels.

Narrative texts also offer numerous opportunities to practise natural language. For example, when students are invited to summarize a text, a close-to-authentic situation can be created by asking them to summarize it as if they were talking to their collegues in the coffee break. In order to provides learners with the necessary lingustic means to cope with the task, the following sentences could be written on the blackboard: - *Olvastam egy érdekes cikket. - Igen, miről? - A magyar konyháról. - És mit írtak? - Azt, hogy a magyarok sok húst esznek, ... (I have read an interesting article. - O yes? What about? - About the Hungarian cuisine. - And, what did they say? - That Hungarians eat plenty of meat...)*

Finally, teachers can model tasks that involve longer narratives. By doing so, they can draw attention to a number of linguistic items students are familiar with but would not necessarily use in their own texts were they not guided towards them. Learners can use the teacher's text as a blueprint to increase the linguistic quality of their own narratives.

Conclusion
Frequent meaningful interactions in the classroom can lead to greater accuracy, more natural language use and well-developed interaction skills provided that learners have a large variety of linguistic panels at their disposal to cope with the task given.

Literature
Brown, H. D. (1994). Teaching by Principles. Prentice Hall.
Davis, P. - Kryszewska, H. (2012): The Company Words Keep. Delta Publishing.
Ellis, R. (2008): The Study of Second Language Acqusition. Oxford University Press.
Hoey, M. (2005): Lexical Priming. A New Theory of Words and Language. London. Routledge.
Lewis, M. (1993): The Lexical Approach.
Lewis, Michael, ed. (1997). Implementing the Lexical Approach, Hove: Language Teaching Publications.
Nunan, D. (1991). Language Teaching Methodology. Prentice Hall International.
Szita, S. - Pelcz, K. (2013-2014): MagyarOK Volume 1-2. Learning package for Hungarian. University of Pécs.