

Daring to Speak. A Review of the Language Learning and Teaching Conference: Developing Speaking Skills

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Daring to Speak. A Review of the Language Learning and Teaching Conference: Developing Speaking Skills (University of Leeds, 15th September 2017)

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The development of speaking skills in a foreign language is for many learners the central focus of their language learning. It is also often linked to feelings of anxiety, fear and panic as communication in another language can naturally be very stressful and uncomfortable. On the other hand it can be elating and rewarding if exchanges in the foreign language are successful. Students often ask for more speaking opportunities, however few seem to engage in activities outside the classroom. New ideas for supporting students in their speaking skills and innovative ways of promoting this are therefore always welcome and it was no surprise that the recent conference in Leeds proved hugely popular, attracting delegates from the UK as well as from abroad.

Conference presentations were delivered within dedicated strands on the topics of Pronunciation, Cognitivism on Speaking Skills, Pragmatics and Interaction, Motivation, Learning outside the classroom, Technology-enhanced Language Learning, Assessment and Task-based Teaching and Learning.

An introductory keynote was given by Fumiyo Nakatsuhara from the Centre for Research in English Language Learning and Assessment¹ (CRELLA) at the University of Bedfordshire. She reported on her research into learning-oriented feedback and the development and assessment of interactional competence. One of CRELLA's aims is the improvement of the assessment of Academic English in HE, however the findings can easily be transferred to other languages. Fumiyo Nakatsuhara presented a checklist of criteria which were developed to assess learners' Interactional Competence such as initiating discussion, responding to the partner, avoiding monologues, negotiating towards a common decision, interactive listening and body language. Although most of these competences are most likely already being assessed in institutions all over the country and beyond, this is no doubt a very useful and comprehensive list that can add to current practice. Discussions following the presentation focused on gender and cultural stereotypes affecting assessment of intercultural competence. The question was raised as to how intercultural competence in one language can be transferred to another. The need to train learners to be confident when speaking in a foreign language was highlighted, while bearing in mind that over-confidence may be seen negatively in some cultures.

Marion Heron from the University of Surrey delivered a very interesting and highly relevant talk on oracy skills in Higher Education, oracy being defined as speaking and listening skills for effective communication and interaction (Wilkinson 1970) or to quote Heron 'how to talk in an educationally purposeful way'. Traditionally more work on the development of oracy

¹ <https://www.beds.ac.uk/crella/crella>

skills has been done in schools (often in relation to employability skills) while many HE institutions seem to have shown less interest in it until now. Marion Heron argued that oracy is increasingly important in universities as teaching in Higher Education is becoming more interactive and the role of talk in learning is more widely recognised (Michaels, O'Connor & Resnick 2008). She suggested that oracy development should be more explicit in the curriculum, however, appropriate materials and criteria were needed to assess these skills. A dedicated conference on Oracy Skills in Higher Education will be hosted by the University of Surrey in January 2018.²

Using technology to enhance and practise speaking skills was showcased in a number of presentations. Alessia Plutino from the University of Southampton reported on her use of Twitter and Storify to improve speaking accuracy. She decided to experiment with Twitter to investigate new ways of 'speaking'. Plutino uses tweeting which is not speaking as such, but could be considered very similar to oral output, as an alternative means of practising speaking. Student output is recorded via Twitter with the aim to complement the traditional recording of students (which they often dislike). Students produce tweets on a given scenario in the target language which is then followed up by a reflective task in English. The aim is to engage students and to encourage them to recognise major mistakes and focus on those in the future.

On a similar topic Isabel Molina-Vidal from the University of Leeds talked about her use of online chats to develop oral fluency along with grammatical accuracy. Online chats are produced by students within a given time to make the situation as similar as possible to an oral face-to-face exchange. This is set up in preparation for face-to-face assessment and has led to positive outcomes in that students feel reportedly more confident in terms of

² <http://store.surrey.ac.uk/conferences-and-events/higher-education-and-technology-enhanced-learning/conferences-and-events/oracy-skills-in-higher-education-5th-january-2018>

accuracy but also fluency. Similar to the above-mentioned contributions on Twitter, the chats can be analysed by students afterwards to identify mistakes and work towards improved performance in the future.

Thomas Jochum-Critchley from the University of York also highlighted the teaching practitioner's dilemma between accuracy and fluency when focussing on oral skills. He reported on the use of audio and video recordings (students use their mobile phones to record themselves, i.e. asking each other questions to practise certain grammar points) under time pressure to promote accuracy and fluency. These tasks are not assessed, but students are able to listen to the recordings again and evaluate their output.

Anna Johnston from the University of Durham delivered a fascinating and inspiring presentation on the incorporation of content and intercultural competence into language teaching. The aim was to create meaningful speaking activities in the format of student-led mini-projects (e.g. group presentations, blogs, articles) to explore interculturality in the target language. A Mini-Mooc requiring approximately eight hours of student work was created to familiarise students with the concepts of interculturality, leading to group projects and students subsequently leading their own seminars in the target language. Students also present their research on interculturality to the university's Global Citizenship Forum. The assessment approach combines inquiry-based learning and research-informed teaching. Alison Hayes' talk based on Martha Carr's *Self-Mentoring for leadership* book (2015) described her idea of adapting the self-mentoring process to the language classroom. The development of tools for self-awareness and reflection aim to provide support for learners. However, the strategies described in the presentation would doubtlessly benefit teachers too.

Some of the ideas presented stemmed from Nancy Kline's 'The Thinking Environment'³, a framework of ten behaviours for thinking. Alison Hayes quoted Kline who said that 'most thinking happens when you have time and space to do it', a statement that rings true for learners and teaching practitioners alike. While Hayes' practice of self-reflection in language learning is not new and has been investigated, i.e. in publications relating to independent learning, her talk was a reminder that, while teachers provide some tools for the learning of their students, learners themselves have responsibility for their progress. Alison Hayes pointed out that the skills of self-reflection acquired in language learning can be transferred more widely to other areas of life which is perhaps something that should be highlighted more often.

The final keynote presentation was given by Tita Beaven from the Open University. Her talk 'Speaking anxiety, motivation and grit: Reflection on informal online language teaching and learning' was highly captivating and explored several ways of supporting language learners to help them overcome anxiety, in particular when speaking in the foreign language. These include the use of language MOOCs which serve as 'bootcamps' before students start on a regular course, as well as the use of Tandem learning via italki⁴. Tita Beaven also mentioned the ADD1 challenge⁵ a website which dares participants to learn a language in 90 days after which they have to communicate with a native speaker for 15 minutes. While this may sound to many like a truly horrific experience, Beaven's point is that language learners, in order to progress, need to get out of their comfort zone and start talking in the foreign language.

There were several other papers which showcased very interesting ideas and practice, such as the use of theatre improvisation activities to develop spontaneity in speaking (presented

³ <http://www.timetothink.com/>

⁴ <https://www.italki.com/home> <http://www.timetothink.com/>

⁵ <http://add1challenge.com/>

by Roser Martínez-Sánchez and Helen Mayer from the London School of Economics), but unfortunately not all can be mentioned here.

It was thrilling to see how colleagues in different institutions tackle the challenges of enhancing their students' accuracy and fluency, try to build their confidence and reduce anxiety. New studies and research will no doubt enhance current practice further and it is hoped that another event like this will follow soon.

Credit has to be given to the conference organisers who put every effort into making this such a successful day. The programme contained just the right amount of keynote speakers and parallel sessions with a good range of topics to choose from. The lunch break offered plenty of opportunity for discussion, visiting the book exhibitions and seeing poster presentations. The book prizes that could be won by delegates were a great idea and no doubt a pleasant surprise for the winners. Thank you to the Leeds team for creating this opportunity for exchange and reflection.

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