

# Is it my turn yet?

**Jenny Wilde** insists on the importance of turn-taking for developing spoken fluency.

**W**hat is 'fluency'? I have heard this question discussed in teachers' rooms in London, Shanghai, Amsterdam and Prague. In all these locations, 'fluency', 'communication' and 'conversation' classes are consistently popular with students, so there is evidently a demand for them and a perceived need to develop spoken fluency. It is important, therefore, to pin down what it means and how we can help our students achieve it.

Speaking is often used as a means to practise grammar or lexis and is rarely taught in coursebooks as a skill for its own sake. Discussing an alternative model for teaching speaking with my colleagues elicited a range of comments on what a fluency class should include, such as 'providing students with the opportunity to speak', 'giving correction and feedback' and 'pronunciation'. When I suggested that there was also a need to focus on speaking sub-skills such as turn-taking, a few of my colleagues brushed this aside, saying that the art of turn-taking is the same in all languages, so it isn't really necessary to teach it.

However, an Italian student prompted me to look into the matter further when he complained that he had plenty to say – and in Italian he had no problems – but in English the conversation always moved on before he had a chance to contribute. In short, he failed to take up his turn. Evidently, then, a confident and outgoing person

perfectly capable of taking up their turns in L1 can't necessarily do so in English.

## What does turn-taking involve?

The process of participating fully in discussions is very complex, involving juggling the skills of listening to others, judging how others feel, contributing opinions and agreeing/disagreeing in real time. According to Scott Thornbury, a series of linguistic and cultural norms govern spoken interaction, including the fact that speakers should take turns to hold the floor, long silences should be avoided (this is culturally specific) and speakers must listen when others are speaking.

Rob Nolasco and Lois Arthur describe the 'cooperative principle', which enables native speakers to engage in a discussion appropriately, saying neither too much nor too little. According to this principle, turn-taking involves certain skills:

- recognising the appropriate moment to get a turn;
- signalling the fact that you want to speak;
- holding the floor while you have your turn;
- recognising when other speakers are signalling their wish to speak;
- yielding the turn.

Students need to be able to do these things in order to join an ongoing discussion, and they need to do them without undue hesitation.

## Problems

### Culture

I tend to reject the assertion that turn-taking is a skill which is the same in all languages and cultures. I believe that many of the problems students have with turn-taking can be traced to cultural differences which create a lack of confidence or a lack of awareness of the social norms connected with the cooperative principle described above.

Japanese students, for example, often have difficulty interrupting other speakers or showing disagreement, as this is frowned upon in their L1. It is also culturally acceptable for Japanese speakers to leave a period of silence before taking up a turn. When participating in discussions with people from Western cultures, this may result in them losing their turn.

Similarly, students may lack awareness of what constitutes an inappropriately long turn and may overly dominate the conversation. This can be due to stress, anxiety and the feeling that they must speak in order to be successful. It can also result from a lack of cultural awareness – they may be dominating the conversation in a way that is perfectly acceptable in their L1.

In English, we use non-verbal signals to help show our turn-taking intentions. Thornbury identifies 'a sharp intake of breath and the raising of the shoulders' as a signal of the wish to take a turn, while head nods from listeners encourage the speaker to continue. Body

language is inherently culturally specific, and our students may neither recognise the use of such gestures, nor be able to use them appropriately themselves.

## Language

Linguistic resources also come into play. For example, the under-use of discourse markers such as *well* or *right* to indicate a shift in topic could result in a speaker being prematurely interrupted and losing their turn. Stress and intonation are also important tools for topic management: a falling tone on words like *OK* or *So* often shows that the speaker is about to change the topic.

Students may also speak with a narrow intonation range which does not engage the listeners or hold their attention, thus exposing the speaker to the likelihood that people will talk over them, forcing them to give up their turn. This is particularly true of students whose L1 does not have as wide an intonation range as English, such as speakers of Slavic languages or Dutch speakers. In addition, students may not have been exposed to a sufficient range of 'adjacency pairs', where the first turn determines the second – eg A: *May I come in here?* B: *Sure, go ahead* – meaning that they do not signal or respond to agreement, disagreement or interruption appropriately.

## Solutions

It's evident that if we are to help our students to participate successfully in discussions, we need to raise their awareness of culturally specific norms and ensure they have sufficient language resources, including lexis, phonology and discourse. We also need to help them recognise that English speakers may use non-verbal signals which are different from the ones they use in their own cultures, and that these are key to indicating intentions during discussions.

I have used the following methods to help develop my students' awareness of the features of turn-taking:

### Watch without sound

Watching a recorded discussion without sound and having the students guess the content helps to raise their awareness of paralinguistic features such as body language and gesture. It enables the students to recognise the extent to which these signal the feelings, attitudes and turn-taking intentions of the speakers.

While watching, the students could complete a questionnaire, answering questions relating to certain speakers' behaviour. For example:

- *How does Sue stop the others from interrupting?*
- *Do you think Joe is interested in or bored by the discussion?*

We can ask the students how they know this, in order to highlight the use of certain signals. They can then watch with the sound on to check if they are right.

### Provide an aural model

The same recorded discussion could then be used to raise awareness of the linguistic features of turn-taking. For example, you can give the students a transcript of the discussion with key lexical phrases used for inviting people to speak and allowing someone to interrupt, etc blacked out. They have to listen for these phrases, which are then modelled and drilled.

The students can be asked to categorise the phrases according to their function and then brainstorm other phrases that may fulfil the same role. Concept questions can be used to raise awareness of intonation features. For example: *Do we use a wide or narrow intonation range when allowing someone to interrupt?*

The students can then go on to practise this language in their own discussions.

### Increase self-awareness

The students' own discussions can be recorded – most phones have the capacity to make video or audio recordings. These can provide a fun and interesting tool for helping students analyse their own interactions and judge their success. Questions could be set as the students play their recordings back, for example:

- Did you speak:*                      *too much / too little / just right?*
- Were your contributions:*        *relevant / off topic?*
- Did you respond to others:*      *well / OK / not at all?*
- Was your body language:*        *appropriate / inappropriate?*

The aim is to develop the students' sub-skills for participation in future discussions and help them realise the

things they are doing well and those they could improve.

### Use a 'talking stick'

When my students either hold their turns too long or have a tendency to stay quiet in group discussions, I often use a 'talking stick', which is passed around the group members. Only the holder of the stick can talk at any one time, and all group members have to hold the stick at least once. This forces more dominant students to relinquish their turns and less confident students to take them up. I find the anticipation of receiving the stick helps the students to focus on the discussion and also encourages them to use body language and facial signals when they want the stick. I also usually encourage the use of adjacency pairs during the passing of the stick – eg *Marek, sorry to interrupt, but can I add something? Of course.* The stick can then be taken away, with the students encouraged to continue the discussion with the same emphasis on shared roles.



I believe that participating in discussions is incredibly challenging for students because it involves a multitude of skills and processes. The sub-skill of turn-taking is crucial to the success or failure of this participation. It is a skill which doesn't necessarily transfer across languages and cultures, but is one that needs to be encouraged and developed. Activities that both raise awareness of these skills and provide opportunities for practice and feedback need to be incorporated into our lessons if we want to help our students communicate and discuss effectively. 

Nolasco, R and Arthur, L *Conversation* OUP 1987

Thornbury, S *How to Teach Speaking* Pearson 2005



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