Peter Robinson: Relevance and contrivance - aspects of planning listening comprehension materials for a first year course in English for electrical engineers

At the Higher Institute of Electronics, Libya, we have been developing an English course for B.Sc. students of electronics. Aware of the unsuitability of a previous first year general English course supplemented by 'scientific' content from various coursebooks, we have spent the first semester devising and testing material which is now being fully used in the second semester and which we hope will form the basis of next year's courses.

As the language of instruction and examination at the Institute is English we soon decided that the main needs of the students were the ability to follow lectures, participate in seminars, write laboratory reports and to recognise and use appropriate language for functions such as instructions, reports, advising and questioning. At the same time, we wanted to introduce lexis and structures grouped around certain notions - movement, measurement, shape, position. We also felt that, although our students would have a fairly thorough knowledge of clause and sentence structure after six years of studying English at school with Arabic teachers, they might be uncertain about discoursal features of spoken and written English. Our aim was, through our new materials, to improve communication in other subject areas so as to equip the student for private study. We were aware of a further area of difficulty pertaining to the lecturers themselves, many of whom were East European or Asian, and who, apart from having marked foreign accents, varied a great deal in their classroom interaction strategies, their cueing or elicitation techniques, and so on.

Our approach has been as far as possible to avoid a fragmentation of skills areas and to try to develop an integrated series of lessons with a listening comprehension focus. In this way we hope we have avoided distinctions of the general/scientific type, shown the relevance of different skills to a central 'interpreting' ability and allowed ourselves flexibility in the choice of situation or topic. A typical unit of our core course is described below; in addition we have prepared materials to supplement the core course in the needs areas described above. Firstly a series of lecturettes have been taped and note-taking, listening comprehension and study skills exercises have been produced to accompany them. These would be used in the first week or weeks of the course to provide the students with an introductory awareness of lecture discourse. Thereafter self-access tapes and exercises on the discourse of individual lecturers at the Institute are available; by using short, modified extracts of actual first semester lectures we hope to provide specific practice in recognising and responding to the interactive 'tactics' of particular lecturers as well as further guided exposure to the lesson content of different subject areas.

Secondly a series of lessons on laboratory report writing would also be given early in the first semester as students are expected to prepare their first reports at the end of the fourth or fifth week. Obviously considerable overlap between the two supplementary courses and the core course is desirable. In the
absence of any pre-sessional English courses at the Institute we feel the supplementary material is necessary.

Each unit of the core course lasts for five hours or one English teaching week. The situations and activities included in each unit were those we considered a student might well be expected to take part in and which would be of use to him for the development of effective communication skills. Because we tried to give practice in features of spoken interaction which students were most likely to need in other course activities, the principal functions taught concerned asking for and receiving advice. The tapes usually took the form of a dialogue between teacher and student with the number of exchanges varying between seven and twelve. The first six units were:

1. Following Directions (7 exchanges)
2. Learning People's Names (8 exchanges)
3. Changing The Timetable (12 exchanges)
4. Correcting A Computer Program (8 exchanges)
5. How The Galvanometer Moves (9 exchanges)
6. Using The Oscilloscope (9 exchanges)

We tried to keep the tapes as authentic as possible in respect of tempo and variety of accent, while avoiding negative interference that would obscure the speech. The first lesson in each unit aimed to pre-teach items of structure and lexis as a preparation for listening to the tape. The tape would then be played in language laboratory, with a gist listening exercise; usually this involved completion of diagram, tracing directions on a map, labelling, etc. This was followed by intensive listening activities; listen-and-repeat model sentences followed by missing word completion and intonation transcription. The third lesson featured reading comprehension using a transcript of the tape. Questions were pre-set, the tape played and read in transcript simultaneously. The questions allow various strategies, sometimes the teacher may stop the tape and "check question" certain lexical items. The fourth lesson involved a written exercise linked to the transcript. Sometimes Cloze passages or rhetorical transformation exercises were used. Finally, a communicative activity phase called for work in pairs or groups. Ideally, this phase gives students an opportunity of putting into action what they have learnt during the week. Often these activities involved information transfer; issuing student A with a sheet containing timetable A and a blank timetable; issuing student B with timetable B and a blank timetable, then asking them to instruct each other to complete the blank timetables. Alternatively, they could be given very similar but slightly different timetables and asked to find the differences by question and answer. The advantage of this approach is that language use is firmly contextualised in relevant situations, skills are not taught in isolation from each other but as aspects of a unitary communicative act.

Where the situation chosen, as in tapes 4, 5 and 6, is subject specific, the tapes are made in close consultation with the lecturers concerned. Items of structure are sometimes planted at stages in the dialogue as it is being worked out, others occur regularly enough to demand inclusion at the pre-teaching stage. Thus the structural and lexical focus of a dialogue is both a mixture of each teacher's decisions about what to include -
positioned phrases, question tags, use of "should" and "shouldn't", and of items suggested by the discourse structure itself. We have found that, as well as introducing new structural items, we are often re-activating knowledge of structures learnt in the schoolroom and contextualising it. This gives the students confidence. Items we found suggested themselves, or were suggested by the teacher, as necessary for pre-teaching the first five dialogues:

1. i) Use of just as an adverb of time: just now, at this moment, and as a limiter: just a little bit, only a small glass. ii) Directional phrases, second on the left, straight on, turn right, etc.

2. i) Use of positional phrases: next to, on the right of, between ... and ... ii) Use of question tags. This is ... isn't it: he's ... isn't he. iii) Present simple and present continuous tenses.

3. i) 'Have' as main verb and as auxiliary. ii) Timetable abbreviations, Engl (English), I (instruction), etc. iii) Use of words from ... till to indicate duration. iv) Use of sequencers, so, then, finally... and use of 'that's all, Is that all?'

4. i) Use of should and shouldn't to ask for and give advice. ii) Use of positional words; between, after, before. iii) Use of contractions in spoken form; there's, that's, here's, it's. iv) Question and answer pairs; Again/Yes, again...Here/Yes, here...Is that all/That's all.

5. i.) Descriptions of movement, around, through, raise, slide. ii) Use of positional phrases, on the right, at the bottom, on top. iii) Simple present and simple present passive; is passed by, is attached by... iv) Answer phrases, That's it; That's right; It is; It might be.

An example of our methodology: Our third dialogue, "Changing the Timetable": this is a dialogue between a student (Ramadan) and the teacher (Mr. Robinson). Our first pre-teaching of 'key items' includes questions using 'have', e.g. What lesson do you have next? Have you had Maths today?

Questions using "from"..."till"... e.g. "How long does this lesson last"? "What time do you have Maths?"

Questions on timetable abbreviations, e.g. "What do these abbreviations mean: W.Sh. Technology; Comp. Prog.; F.E.C.?

Each section is introduced and practised orally before notes are completed on a worksheet.

The second lesson includes a revision of this material, then the tape is played. The students are asked to complete Ramadan's timetable by making the appropriate changes to a copy they have been given. They are then given a sheet with listen-and-repeat model sentences from the transcript e.g. "What do you have on Sunday afternoon?" They then hear the same sentences again with words missed out, these have to be written on the sheet before tone-unit boundaries are marked in.
The third lesson is used for reading comprehension. The students are given their copy of the transcript and asked to answer various inferential and factual questions e.g. "When does Ramadan have a free period?" "What group is Ramadan in?" They hear the tape at the beginning and again at the end of the lesson.

For the fourth lesson the students are given a Cloze report of the dialogue and asked to complete it by putting it into the past tense. A further, less guided, exercise on reported speech is given after this. Other written exercises deal with cohesion, rhetorical transformation, use of thought connectives. Here is an excerpt from the Cloze passage.

Mr. Robinson asked _____ if he was _____ yesterday. Ramadan said, _____, he was ______ ______ with his friend. Mr. Robinson said there had been a ____ change and asked Ramadan if he ______ to write the changes down with.

Further work on 'asked, told, said' can be done orally before students attempt to write a report of another short conversation beginning: Dr. Halit: Do you know how the Galvanometer coil works, Hamdi? Hamdi: No, could you explain it again Dr.?

Finally activities along the lines previously described involving completion of timetables in pairs or groups are set up. If this unit is used at the start of a semester there would obviously be reinforcement of these learning exercises outside the English classroom. With this in mind we have planned our choice of situations to provide similar links between what we teach and what language use is likely to be required of the students in other teaching or administrative activities at the Institute.

In conclusion, what we have been attempting is an integration of notions of measurement, movement, position, direction and shape with further practice in subject-specific lexis as in 'Correcting A Computer Program' or 'How The Galvanometer Moves' while providing a listening comprehension focus for each unit. We hope thus to provide support for students exposed in their first undergraduate year to a considerable amount of spoken English (often for the first time) and to make our materials as relevant as possible, while acknowledging that, 'The pedagogy of any subject aims at guiding learners towards their terminal behaviour by the contrivance of appropriate intervening stages'.

Relevance and contrivance I have suggested are both present as elements in decisions about what the structural and lexical focus of each dialogue should be.

References

1. 'The other area of distinctive choice, tactics, handles the syntagmatic patterns of discourse: the way in which items precede, follow and are related to each other' p. 29. J.McH. Sinclair, R.M. Coulthard (1975) Towards An Analysis of Discourse. O.U.P.

2. This phrase is Julian Dakin's. 'The term "key items" is not synonymous with "useful words in English". They are items which in a particular passage play a specifically significant role in the structure of the passage, so that failure to understand them
is very likely to lead to a failure to understand a large section of the passage, if not all of it', p. 95. J. Dakin 'Language Laboratory Materials' in ECAL vol. 3. (ed. Allen, Pit Corder) O.U.P (1974).

3. We have tried to follow the intonation syllabus suggested on pp. 132-133 of Discourse Intonation And Language Teaching. Brazil, Coulthard, Johns (1980) Longman.