

Oral and written language from a social perspective

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Annotation: This article looks at the CEFR's influence over textbook writers addressing substantive issues, including the nature and use of written language as a linguistic model in EFL course books and the complex issue of oral and written language from a sociolinguistic perspective. Article gives a brief overview of the role of tasks and the relevance of context in the design of speaking activities in EFL textbooks as well.

Key words: spoken language, written language, personal informal, orality and spontaneous.

In this article, we shall examine how both types of language differ in function by paying attention to the particular features that define spoken language as a natural means of spontaneous interaction and those of written language for effective social language use. The sociolinguistic relationship between oral and written language has been influenced by sudden changes in social habits produced in the history of humanity. In this sense, and regarding the important sociolinguistic dimension of speech, Tuson (1996) points out the close relationship between the social functions of writing and speech, "it is especially because of writing that a great part of the memory of human beings has been stored up and preserved, that is, the sciences and techniques that allow every new generation to make one's way without starting from scratch."

In practice, the basic, primary function of written language – recording and transmitting information involved in a verbal exchange – has been complemented by more complex functions in accordance with new social needs such as institutional (as opposed to personal/informal) correspondence, and administrative or bureaucratic functions (commercial dealings, legal decisions, diplomatic treaties, etc.). Indeed, written language as well as spoken language fulfils a great range of social functions that respond to the growing social demands of a community.

From its origins, the basic primary function of written language has been that of recording (i.e., storage). Ordinarily, it is used to make accurate records of what has been said or done in a particular occasion (e.g., taking notes). This way of keeping information responds to our generally very inexact memories of verbal interaction, since any report that is written down can be kept in a durable, permanent form. Similarly, there is no limitation on time and no limit on distance, since writing may be transportable. From this point of view, we can see that spoken language is limited in these respects because it is composed spontaneously in real time. With reference to the volume of traceable evidence, writing is relevant for its capacity of expository density (Moreno-Cabrera 2005,). Any explanation can be reduced in length by means

of choosing appropriate vocabulary and the combination of certain structures involving less repetition, with the use of more lexically precise words that contribute to keeping most of it in less space. Consequently, flexibility in reading techniques will be required to decipher so much condensed information (Stubbs 1980).

Amidst the great variety and density of information two implicit features of speech and writing can be perceived: spontaneity and elaboration, respectively. However, despite the interdependence between both types of language, they are not similarly distributed. We find evidence of this fact in diverse communicative situations in which a lot of complex written texts and non-formalized orality are produced. Thus, although formalized orality and spontaneous writing are less frequent, it is not unusual to find oral exchanges that are not spontaneous. For example: (a) written texts that have been designed to be spoken as if they were not written such as speaking in turns, television debates or even play scripts in which the conventions of formal orality have been exploited; (b) texts written to be spoken without concealment of their written origin, such as conferences, speeches or lectures; and (c) written texts that have not necessarily been conceived to be spoken, but can be read out as novels or newspaper articles (Luque and Alcoba 1999). We should mention as well those situations in which spontaneous writing has become a need: communicative exchanges by fax, electronic mail, chats or messages via mobile telephones (Blanche-Benveniste 1998).

As far as the functions that written and spoken language fulfil in social communicative affairs are concerned, Barton (2007) points out there is considerable overlap between them: Furthermore, Barton also notes that writing has a "social priority," in that it "carries greater social status in many societies and often carries legal weight" (Barton 2007).

With reference to the social environment, we live in and how language is used for communicative purposes, we can see that oral spontaneity in natural interaction lives along with a non-spontaneous orality. This means that we, as members of a modern western society, have been facing double orality. Whereas spontaneous interactions are implicit in human communicative behavior, oral mass media communication, including television, radio, advertising, movies, and the Internet, are reported orally since the final result depends to a great extent on a previous elaborated text in written form. For further development on this issue see the works by Alcoba (1999) and Blanche-Benveniste (1998) among other experts. Indeed, when following a restrictive way of interpreting orality, the different modes between writing and speech for expressing linguistic meaning have been ignored, as well as, the diverse social functions both kinds of language fulfil in society. However, the reality of speech and writing in contemporary society reveals how the complex social functions of spoken and written forms of language relate each other in everyday circumstances. For example, Blanche Benveniste (1998, 34) considers the fact that people speak, listen, write and read illustrates the need for communicating for a variety of purposes in different social situations.

All in all, the sociolinguistic use of speech and writing is not confined to a specific kind of social interaction but corresponds to the communicative purposes for which an event has arisen. The complex and demanding needs of living in modern society have promoted a considerable overlap between speech and writing, to the extent that the increasingly involvement of writing in the recording of social events has become a trivial and natural phenomenon. Let us take any 138 conventional

communicative situation involving any kind of information that we require to remember, to be confirmed or verified in the future. For example, when making an appointment there must be some kind of agreement between the participants upon the exact date and time of the event. In order not to forget the relevant information both participants will take it down in their respective diaries or any other sort of writing support. There are other social events in which writing is simultaneous with speech as the interaction between the participants is going on such as: filling in an application form, taking down orders, making a shopping list or writing a note to remember something, etc.

In sum, writing and speech cannot be considered as opposites. In fact, we have uncovered a misjudgment about the formlessness of speech. It can not be held that writing is the transcription of speech, since this is a view, which has been based on a high, idealized notion of writing as a finished product, rather than as a process (Stubbs 1980; Brown 1983; Halliday 1985; Cook 1989; McCarthy 1991; McCarthy and Carter 1994; Junyent 1999; Moreno-Cabrera 2005; 2016).

We have mentioned only some examples that show why it is necessary to reflect on the use of writing in combination with speech in oral spontaneous exchanges. Thus, whereas common instances of the simultaneous use of spontaneous writing and speech have become indispensable in modern western society, they go unnoticed in teaching materials and academic environments.

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