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Lang. Teach. (2017), **50.2**, 247–260 © Cambridge University Press 2017
doi:10.1017/S0261444816000483

Thinking Allowed

Research into practice: Scaffolding learning processes to improve speaking performance

Christine C. M. Goh National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore
christine.goh@nie.edu.sg

This article is a personal view of the application of results from three areas of research that I believe are relevant to developing second language speaking in the classroom: task repetition, pre-task planning and communication strategies. I will discuss these three areas in terms of level of research application – where research is not applied well (task repetition), where it is reasonably well applied (pre-task planning), and where it may have been over-applied (communication strategies). For each area I briefly review the relevant research to highlight how teachers can potentially apply the research findings to scaffold learning processes in speaking. I will also suggest how much of the research is getting through to teachers and being taken up in day-to-day teaching of English. I draw mainly on my own extensive experience as a teacher educator for over 20 years working with pre-service English teachers of bilingual students in Singapore schools and in-service teachers attending professional development courses or pursuing Master's degree studies, as well as college English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers from the People's Republic of China receiving postgraduate teaching certification in English language teaching (ELT) and higher degree qualifications in my university each year. I will also include some observations about classroom practice based on a survey of selected course books.

1. Introduction

Speaking may look effortless for competent speakers, but it is in fact a cognitively and socially demanding skill. This is particularly true for language learners who need to decide what to say and how to express and encode their thoughts into sounds in speech streams that make sense to their listeners. They also need to learn to interact in a range of communicative situations and respond in ways that are contextually appropriate. Learners also need to know how language is structured in different types of discourse according to situations and contexts. To develop learners' speaking abilities, language teachers typically organize them into small groups or pairs where they can practise communicating in the target language. While they talk, their teachers move from group to group to listen to and monitor their talk. Over

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444816000483 Published online by Cambridge University Press

time some learners may develop greater fluency and confidence but not necessarily greater accuracy. Some, however, may lose interest in learning to speak the language because of a perceived lack of success.

To learn to communicate well orally, learners need systematic guidance and support to plan language use, enhance vocabulary and develop relevant speaking skills. Teachers, in turn, need materials and pedagogical knowledge to scaffold their students' learning process, instead of leaving them to complete a speaking task on their own before moving to another. Scaffolding in speaking is the process by which teachers provide helping activities to enable learners to accomplish a speaking task which they would otherwise have been unable to do well on their own. Scaffolding activities bring learners closer to a state where they can eventually do the task well without teachers' help (Maybin, Mercer & Steirer 1992). Scaffolding processes may also occur when learners receive assistance from other interlocutors to clarify the meaning of what they are trying to express (Foster & Ohta 2005). This article focuses on scaffolding processes that teachers can deliberately include when planning lessons on speaking. Appropriate scaffolding can increase learners' competence in speaking, be it in relation to their application of language knowledge such as grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary or the use of skills and strategies relevant to task demands. When they speak on their own during a task, language learners seldom have the capacity to pay attention to all aspects of speech production because many of these complex processes interact simultaneously. Rather than thinking about them and how different aspects of their speech can be enhanced, learners are more likely to be concerned with getting their meaning across as best as they can by using whatever linguistic and paralinguistic resources they have. Teachers can include scaffolding activities in speaking lessons to help learners become aware of the processes involved in speaking, thereby making these processes 'visible' to them. With greater knowledge of the various aspects of speech production and experiencing the processes personally, students will be more likely to complete the task at hand well and approach similar tasks in future more confidently.

Scaffolding activities can be added on to regular speaking practice tasks to help learners become aware of speech processes and perform better. Specifically, scaffolding activities can assist learners in planning and organizing speech, and learn the language and strategies for strengthening oral communication abilities. There is now a body of research that offers insights into how teachers can scaffold the learning of speaking in class to improve performance. For the purpose of this article I have identified three areas of research that have direct implications for classroom practice: task repetition, pre-task planning and communication strategies. Each of these areas is summarized to show how cognitive (thinking and expressing) and social (interactional) processes in second language (L2) speaking can be supported. Selected studies are highlighted and pedagogical principles are identified, after which I suggest how much of the research is getting through to teachers and being taken up in day-to-day language teaching and explain why this state of affairs exists.

Application of research by teachers is likely to happen in four ways. The first is through teaching materials that include perspectives from research findings. These consist of published course books, supplementary enrichment materials or materials that are jointly developed by or with teachers. The second way is through formal pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. The third way is when teachers have access to reports

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and digests/summaries of research findings that set forth clear pedagogical applications. Finally, application can occur through further studies. Teachers pursuing Master's or doctoral programmes can learn about current and seminal research and apply these research insights into their own teaching upon completion of their studies.

I will discuss three areas of research application with respect to task repetition, pre-task planning and communication strategies – where research, in my view, is not applied well, where it is reasonably well applied, and where it may have been over-applied. I draw on my 20 years of experience as a teacher educator in Singapore, which has a bilingual education system where English learning is compulsory for all students at primary (age 6–12 years) and secondary (age 13–16 years) levels. I also include observations from my work with hundreds of EFL teachers from the People's Republic of China who seek postgraduate ELT certification and higher degree qualifications in my university each year. As will be seen, there are a number of similarities between both groups of teachers but also some differences. Where possible, I will also provide some observations from English course books used in both countries.

2. Research findings that have not been well applied (task repetition)

Task repetition is a procedure which requires learners to do a speaking task again either immediately or at another time. It typically involves the repetition of the exact same task but may also be a repetition of the same task procedure with different contents. The interval could be minutes, a day or several days after the task is first carried out. This line of research is motivated by the theory that speaking is the outcome of a number of cognitive processes, as illustrated in Levelt's (1989) model of speech processing (see Bygate 1998, 2005). According to this model, speech is the result of interactions of cognitive processes that plan content (conceptualization) and encode it using selected grammar and vocabulary (formulation) with articulatory processes that enable these ideas to be expressed audibly (articulation). When learners repeat a task they can integrate knowledge and skills used in the first attempt into a repeat performance. Repeating an oral task is a form of mental rehearsal which can minimize a person's cognitive load because rehearsal allows the speaker to re-use parts of what they have planned and produced in the first task performance. This results in partial automatization of some speech processes. When some mental processes are automatized for a task, the individual no longer needs to pay attention to these processes and their attention can be directed to other aspects of the task such as formulating utterances and monitoring speech. As with all first attempts at any kind of learning task, a person will not be able to give a complete and polished performance; there will be gaps, or even mistakes. When language learners engage with a speaking task for the first time, they will experience these challenges, more so because they have limited control over the lexical, grammatical and phonological systems of the language.

Positive effects of task repetition on L2 speaking performance have been reported in a number of studies on learners of different ages. Learners who had opportunities to repeat a task were able to build on earlier experiences to produce more accurate and idiomatic speech (Bygate 1996, 2001), and better framing of the narratives or stories (Bygate & Samuda 2005).

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They show improved pragmatic knowledge in making polite requests (Takimoto 2012) and overall improved fluency (Bygate 1996; Ahmadian & Tavakoli 2011; Bei 2013; Thai & Boers 2016; Lambert, Kormos & Minn 2016). As a pedagogic tool, task repetition has been shown to help direct learners' attention towards form in the repeat performance if some form-focused activity preceded it (Hawkes 2012). While repeating a task once improved metalinguistic knowledge about selected grammar rules, it was insufficient for learners to proceduralize the knowledge in oral tasks (van de Guchte et al. 2016). Nevertheless, there are indications that repeating a task allowed learners to focus more on form and less on content (Fukuta 2016).

Learners who were asked to repeat similar tasks involving the same procedures but different content (i.e. task-type repetition) showed increased syntactic complexity (Kim & Tracy-Ventura 2013), while those who repeated the same procedure with slight variations in content showed increased vocabulary use and accuracy in grammar and pronunciation as well as frequent occurrences of self-monitoring and corrections (Lynch & Maclean 2000, 2001). In recognition and production of forms of request, learners who repeated identical tasks demonstrated greater improvement than those who repeated similar types of tasks (Takimoto 2012). Improved performances as a result of task repetition were likely because of the way 'previous experience of a specific task aids speakers to shift their attention from processing the message content to working on formulations of the message' (Bygate 2001: 44). For task repetition to have a more lasting impact on efficient speech performance, learners may need to repeat a task not just once but as many as five times, but the frequency may vary according to the communication tasks and discourse genres (Lambert et al. 2016). Repeating the same task many times over several months has also been shown to have some transfer effects on a new task (Ahmadian 2011).

Task repetition holds promise for helping learners improve speaking performance, but in my view very little of this research has found its way into teaching materials and lesson procedures in English classrooms in both Singapore and China. Speaking activities often take the form of learners talking in small groups or pairs with the teacher supervising them. These activities may be there only to serve a 'higher' purpose of providing content and ideas for reading and writing activities. Activities such as brainstorming and discussions, while allowing learners to practise their oral skills, are often used as a means of generating ideas for writing or activating prior knowledge or schema for a reading comprehension text. Even when the activities are used for the dedicated purpose of improving speaking, they are likely to be 'one-off' events. In my personal experience, I have yet to see a speaking task in the course books at any level and context that is repeated either in its entirety or in part for the explicit purpose of reaping the benefits indicated by research.

My conversations with teachers from both Singapore and China confirm this. Typically, a speaking activity is carried out once, and the outcomes are either presented to the rest of the class or used as input for the next stage of the language lesson. Sometimes teacher feedback is given to the learners. Teachers from Singapore and China seem to consider speaking activities to be PRACTICE activities rather than LEARNING activities. The adage 'practice makes perfect' is a commonly held belief and the teachers interpret it as giving learners various speaking tasks in class so that with time they will eventually become fluent speakers of English. Some teachers also feel that once an oral communication act is performed there is little point in repeating it. Unlike writing, where working on drafts is seen to be a natural process, speaking

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is perceived to be transient. Thus when it comes to speaking pedagogy, the same perception holds. Students are encouraged to do their best when carrying out a speaking task but teachers then seem to believe that not much needs to be done by way of helping them once the task is completed, apart from giving learners some feedback on their performance. Teachers in both countries have told me that some kinds of speech necessitate planning and rehearsal (for example, preparing for an oral presentation), while other kinds of oral interaction such as role plays and information gap tasks do not. Furthermore, the idea of repetition is viewed cautiously by teachers because they think their students might find it boring, as the element of novelty is lost after the first performance. They fear that students who do not know the rationale for task repetition will also see it as a waste of time.

Another reason why many teachers do not repeat a speaking task may simply have to do with the fact that they are not aware of these research findings, which are still relatively new. In Singapore a packed teacher education curriculum means that pre-service teachers are exposed to a highly selective range of theoretical perspectives that are directly related to the national English Language curriculum. For example, in the past, theoretical rationales for communicative language teaching methods and knowledge about genre or text types have been emphasized to develop trainee teachers' abilities to deliver the curriculum. Pre-service teachers also tend to prefer learning methods and techniques that they can apply immediately when they plan lessons to knowing about research findings. Their priority is to learn how to use text book activities effectively rather than read research articles where pedagogical implications may not be immediately clear or relevant to their situation. A number of experienced teachers doing their Master's degrees in my university who were introduced to research findings on the positive effects of task repetition expressed surprise to me that they had never considered repeating any speaking tasks as a way of scaffolding learning. As the idea of task repetition has also not been taken up by text book writers in general, the chances of teachers repeating speaking practice activities in an English classroom are extremely low and may remain so unless specific interventions in teacher professional development are carried out.

The lack of awareness about the relevance of task repetition is similarly found among teachers from China. In Chinese EFL classrooms where principles of communicative language teaching are embraced, learner talk is encouraged through pair or group work. However, due to large class sizes at the college level, such oral activities are often difficult to conduct and even more challenging to monitor. Requiring students to repeat oral tasks would be a challenge for most teachers who find that maintaining motivation for engagement with tasks is paramount. The main challenge, however, is that many EFL teachers in China lack adequate knowledge and skills for teaching speaking, let alone the time and skills required to read the latest research findings (Chen & Goh 2014). Nevertheless, some attempts are being made to promote the insights gained from task repetition research for speaking pedagogy. In a publication for language teachers' professional learning widely available in the Singapore and Asian region, I proposed a four-stage model for speaking instruction (Goh 2007). Repetition of tasks is carried out in the final stage as 'further practice' following the first three stages of 'pre-speaking support', 'meaning-oriented activity' and 'language-focused activity' (p. 24). This idea of enhancing spoken performance through repeating a task was articulated in greater detail in the Teaching Speaking Cycle pedagogical model (Goh & Burns 2012). In

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both proposed models, task repetition is done after learners have had a chance to examine the language, skills or strategies required for the task just completed. After the repeat performance, learners reflect on and self-assess their performance before receiving feedback from their teacher or peers. By asking students to repeat a task, teachers provide implicit scaffolding through increasing students' awareness about language and skills, but more importantly, give them a chance to 'rehearse' their performance so that they can achieve better results the second or even third time.

3. Research findings that have been reasonably well applied (pre-task planning)

As noted earlier, speaking in a new language can be daunting for language learners and cause them anxiety and other debilitating emotions even for routine speaking activities. The need to conceptualize, formulate and articulate their thoughts often takes up so much cognitive space in their working memory that language learners can focus on very few things adequately. Their attention will typically be directed at how to get their meaning across (VanPatten 1990; Skehan 1998) and less is directed at formulating grammatical utterances. So a simple task of telling a story or narrating something that happened can be a challenge. Their speech may be halting, incomplete and limited in ideas or content. Any attempt at articulating richer ideas may create even more grammatical and lexical errors.

Like task repetition, the rationale for pre-task planning is based on a cognitive approach to language learning (Skehan 1998) and L2 speaking development (Segalowitz 2010). Giving learners time to plan before a task to think of what to say and how to say it helps to free up attentional space during speaking for articulation of ideas, speech monitoring and self-repairs. Skehan (1998) summarized the main benefits of pre-task planning as follows: improved complexity in selected tasks, more complex content as a result of deeper interpretation of task demands, more experimentation with forms to express complex ideas, better self-monitoring during task performance and all round improved fluency. He also explained the pedagogical purposes of a pre-task phase, which include introducing or teaching new language, enabling learners to reorganize their developing linguistic knowledge, activating existing linguistic knowledge, recycling specific language items, easing processing load and pushing learners to interpret tasks in more demanding ways (pp. 137–139).

Classroom research has shown positive effects of pre-task planning on language complexity and fluency, particularly in monologic tasks (e.g. Ellis 1987; Foster & Skehan 1996; Skehan & Foster 1997, 2005; Mehnert 1998; Ortega 1999; Yuan & Ellis 2003). Learners who planned with a partner, individually or were guided by a teacher all performed significantly better at oral tasks than those who did no planning (Geng & Ferguson 2013). When learners were provided with models of interaction as part of a planning strategy, they outperformed their peers who had unguided planning time in their attention to question forms and question development (Kim 2013). Research has also examined 'strategic planning', that is strategy training prior to a speaking task (Ellis 2005: 3). Learners who engaged in strategic planning were able to apply strategies during online planning (during a speaking task) and produced more fluent speech compared with those who did not receive any pre-task strategy training

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(Seifoori & Vahidi 2012). (See also the discussion of communication strategies in the next section.)

In contrast to the positive results in the above-mentioned studies, findings from language testing research suggest that learners did not benefit as much from planning before a test. One such study that examined the effects of one minute or two minutes of planning time found no significant difference in terms of scores and discourse quality of fluency and accuracy (Wigglesworth & Elder 2010). The researchers concurred with the view that stressful contexts of testing could prevent test-takers from enjoying the benefits of planning demonstrated in classroom research (Ellis 2005) and that the short planning time might have been insufficient for planning to have any effect. In another study where test-takers were given three minutes of planning time in a paired format, they produced longer turns particularly at the beginning of the interaction but their fluency appeared to have been hampered by their attempts at recalling what they had planned to say (Nitta & Nakatsuhara 2014). Planning also appeared to have limited effect on the test-takers' performance scores.

It is very likely that many teachers in Singapore and China have not read about the research highlighted above. Nevertheless, in my experience they are familiar with the idea of giving students time to plan before a speaking task. They have carried out pre-task planning at one time or another in their English lessons, for example when a task is deemed to be challenging, they generally agree that planning benefits their students. Text books for upper primary and secondary students in Singapore have planning activities that precede more formal speaking activities, such as making a presentation to a group or the class. As many teachers still follow prescribed activities in text books quite closely, the use of pre-task planning is probably practised as often as it appears in these books. Another possible reason for teachers' use of pre-task planning is that they see it as logical that students need time to prepare for a highly visible task such as making a speech or a presentation. This is especially true for presentation activities where developing knowledge about content is required. Students are given time to research a topic, prepare the presentation and rehearse it.

Planning time is provided for during oral examinations in Singapore at both primary and secondary levels. For example, in the O level oral examination for secondary school students, candidates are given about ten minutes to prepare how they will read aloud a given passage and converse with the examiners. Students have been coached by their teachers on how to use the planning time to practise segmenting the text and pausing at appropriate places, as well as rehearsing the sounds of unfamiliar words. They also use the time to plan what they can talk about in the second part of the exam where candidates have to converse with the examiner on a topic related to the theme in the picture. Teachers from China also report using pre-task planning whenever possible, but especially in test-taking situations where planning time is seen as fair and helpful to the candidates. The findings emerging from research on planning for oral tests should therefore be of interest to teachers.

While teachers include pre-task planning in their lesson sequences, my view is that they may not fully appreciate the theoretical underpinnings of the procedure or the relative effects of guided and unguided planning time. As many teachers may be unfamiliar with the construct of speaking and in particular the various aspects of speech production, they are unable to apply theory to an understanding of the challenges that learners face when required to attend concurrently to meaning and form. Therefore even though pre-task planning is

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a common practice for helping students prepare for oral exams and formal presentations, teachers' motivation for using it may in fact have little to do with their familiarity with research findings that have been published. More importantly, speaking lessons should include pre-task planning time as a means of helping learners speak more fluently and accurately during a task. Thus, instead of getting students to begin a task immediately, teachers can set aside some planning time so that students can prepare the ideas and the vocabulary that can help them during the interaction that follows. Pre-task planning time can also be supported with prompts or guides so that students can use the planning time well; research has indicated that unguided planning time has less impact on performance compared to guided and teacher-led planning.

4. Research findings that may have been over-applied (communication strategies)

Language learners have limited processing capacity due to constraints of time and interactional contexts when thinking of what to say and how to say it. They may face challenges in finding the most suitable words or constructing utterances that are grammatical. In addition, they may face listening comprehension problems that impair their participation in face-to-face communication (Goh 2000). Their ability to use communication strategies (CSs) is an important component of their communicative competence (Canale & Swain 1980). CSs are important in both first (L1) and second language interactions, but they are particularly useful to learners who have yet to master a language well. As Hughes (2013) observed, language learners need strategies that can help them buy processing time so as to maintain their turn in an interaction. A learner's strategic competence can compensate for disruptions in communication due to language problems and enhance the effectiveness of face-to-face communication (Bialystok 1983; Canale 1983; Faerch & Kasper 1983, 1984; Nakatani 2005). In other words, CSs are an important resource for meeting both cognitive and social demands in face-to-face interactions.

CSs have psycholinguistic and interactional functions that can help learners address lexical and discourse problems that arise during an interaction (Nakatani & Goh 2007). CSs can also help learners manage listening problems. These include comprehension checks, confirmation checks and clarification requests, which are all signals that the listener or the speaker has encountered a linguistic problem and seeks to resolve it. Meaning negotiation through the use of interactional strategies can also have a positive effect on language acquisition (Pica 2002) because it can potentially generate modified comprehensible output (Swain 1985, 1995). The use of CSs by EFL learners has also been found to promote accuracy of language use and maintain conversation flow even when no obvious communication problems exist (Williams, Inscoe & Tasker 1997; Jamshidnejad 2011). Test-takers' success has also been partly attributed to the use of interaction strategies they have been taught for maintaining fluency and negotiating meaning (Nakatani 2005). As learners generally lack adequate vocabulary for communication, they require strategies to overcome these lexical gaps. Paraphrase was found to be the most frequently used strategy to convey meaning in vocabulary explanation tasks while clarification request was most common in interaction tasks (Mei & Nathalang

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2010). A similar strategy, appealing for assistance, was found to have benefited learners as it enabled them to prolong a conversation thereby getting more opportunities to negotiate meaning (Maleki 2007). Variations in the use of compensation strategies related to learning styles have been suggested (Littlemore 2003).

Focused CS instruction can help learners develop the quantity and quality of CS use (Dörnyei 1995) even though gains in language use may not always be immediate. In one study, learners who had received CS instruction on how to use the compensation strategy of paraphrasing could apply such strategies well to achieve their communication goals, but their overall task performance scores were not significantly better than those who did not receive strategy instruction (Rossiter 2003). In another study, however, learners who were taught both psycholinguistic and interactional CSs were able to maintain their conversations and achieved better overall speaking test performance than those who received no instruction (Maleki 2007). Strategy instruction contributed to test-takers' success because CSs enabled them to be more fluent and engage better in negotiating meaning (Nakatani 2005).

CS research, which began more than three decades ago, was one of the earliest lines of inquiry related to L2 learners' speaking abilities. It is perhaps owing to this long research tradition that the importance of CSs has reached more teachers, teacher educators and material developers. It is not uncommon to find language text books that incorporate some CSs as part of learner training and at least one study has shown such kinds of materials to be effective in developing learners' speaking abilities (Maleki 2007). The learning of CSs is not a new feature of the English curriculum in Singapore. Two previous English Language syllabuses in the 1990s and 2000s emphasized the importance of learners' interactional competence to language acquisition, self-confidence, participation in learning and intercultural communication (Ang 2000; Lim 2000). The focus on effective language use in communication continues into the present syllabus in which the ability to 'use appropriate skills, strategies and language to convey and construct meaning during interactions' is a key learning outcome for both primary and secondary students (Curriculum Planning and Development Division 2008: 54).

The relevance of CSs to speaking performance is, to my mind, something that many Singaporean and Chinese teachers are most familiar with. It is also an area of speaking that teachers believe to be important for their students and is the most pervasive form of help that students get in today's classrooms. Key syllabus documents in both countries that include strategies for language use further reinforce the teachers' personal beliefs of the importance of CSs. Most of the teachers I have taught or spoken with have told me that they frequently encouraged students to use these strategies when talking in pairs or groups because they believed CSs would improve their students' performance. English text books in Singapore and China often include lists of formulaic expressions that learners can use to seek clarification or repetition. Teachers are therefore supported by readily available CS materials in course books to help them teach the language that learners need for different contexts and levels of formality.

CSs also serve as important test-taking strategies, which can facilitate better performance during test conditions (Cohen 2006). It is in this context of the washback effects of oral examinations that CS research findings may most obviously be said to be 'over-applied'. For example, when students cannot remember or do not know a word in English, they are advised

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by their teachers to continue talking by using words they know. Although the terminology for CSs is not stated, what the teachers are in fact teaching students is to use paraphrase and approximation to compensate for lack of lexical knowledge. Scoring rubrics for speaking tests often refer to the use of paraphrase and other facilitation strategies in a positive way. Some examiners in Singapore have also stated that they would expect candidates to maintain smooth conversations by using strategies such as circumlocution (Ang-Aw 2010). This is also the reason why teachers frequently encourage students to use strategies to compensate for lexical gaps.

Teachers' understanding of the benefits of CS use appears to be narrowly focused on its compensatory effects when there are problems with vocabulary and not its potential for language development through spoken interaction in and out of class. As I see it, the potential of CS use leading to modified comprehensible output is something that many English teachers may not know about or understand. It is probably because of a lack of understanding of the importance of negotiation of meaning and psycholinguistic support for learners that few speaking lessons actually develop these processes explicitly. Therefore there remains a need to help teachers understand the theoretical implications of CSs for language learning so that they can plan lessons where speaking and language development can be scaffolded through the use of CSs by students and with their teachers.

5. Conclusion

Speaking activities are important in many English classrooms that are guided by principles of communicative language teaching. Despite research findings on how certain procedures can enhance speaking performance, speaking classrooms tend to proceed quite independently of these insights. Task repetition is hardly ever encouraged in the classroom and pre-task planning is carried out mainly for oral presentations or talks but rarely for informal group or pair speaking activities. On the other hand, the use of CSs receives relatively more attention because it is included in most recent language course books. It seems most often presented as a way of improving test performance, but more systematic strategy instruction for day-to-day communication still appears to be lacking. For example, other than advising students to use paraphrase, a strategy that may come naturally to many people, teachers can focus on teaching language in space-holding formulae ('Let me see now, how would I put that . . . ', 'That's really interesting . . . ').

The teaching of speaking in language classrooms in Singapore and China presents many challenges. One such challenge has to do with teachers' own pedagogical knowledge and skills. It seems clear to me that some teachers still lack confidence when it comes to planning and conducting speaking and listening lessons, and speaking is often seen as less important compared with reading and writing because of public examinations which are still weighted more heavily towards reading and writing (Goh 2005; Chen & Goh 2011). Like busy teachers in general, they have few opportunities to learn about the latest research findings and research-informed pedagogical principles. Furthermore, their classes tend to be large and opportunities for students to talk are often limited. Classes in many Singaporean primary and secondary

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schools generally have 30–40 children so teachers may find it challenging to conduct and monitor speaking tasks. This challenge is even greater for college EFL classes in China where each class can have as many as 60–80 students. I have noted that many Chinese EFL teachers remain unaware of many theoretical concepts for speaking development and may lack opportunities to learn new ways of teaching speaking.

This situation may be changing, however. Over the years, I have seen a growing interest among teachers from both Singapore and China in learning how to teach speaking systematically. This is in part due to curricular innovations which place greater emphasis on speaking and give more weighting for spoken English components in public examinations, as in the case of Singapore. In the EFL context of China, learners have to speak English well for better academic and career opportunities in a globalized world, and it seems to me that new syllabuses for English reflect this emphasis. Continual improvements to teacher preparation and professional development in both countries also mean further strengthening of the research/theory–practice nexus.

For teachers to teach speaking better they need an understanding of the construct of speaking competence. They need to understand cognitive demands of speech processing as well as the skills, strategies and discourse routines that are needed for smooth and meaningful oral communication. With this understanding teachers can create tasks to scaffold processes for learning to speak a second language. This will then help students achieve greater automaticity over time in order to produce speech that is fluent, accurate and appropriate. It is also important that teachers develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the potential of interaction for language acquisition. This can motivate teachers to spend more time on speaking tasks or make use of other opportunities to promote the learning of speaking.

Current speaking pedagogies still tend to focus on getting students to speak but pay little attention to cognitive and social processes that enable effective monologic and dialogic oral communication. Each of the three areas of research highlighted in this article offers valuable insights for enhancing practice. While these findings should be further examined through studies that point out implications for practice, there is also room for greater teacher involvement in validating these claims through classroom inquiry (Burns 2010). Teachers can take greater ownership of their pedagogy and explore these new possibilities by carrying out small classroom inquiry projects to 'pressure test' the findings of academic research conducted in environments that may not always represent authentic classroom ecology. This is something that teachers in Singapore in particular can do because of recent efforts in increasing teachers' classroom inquiry capacity (Ministry of Education 2008).

Research in speaking should continue to improve our understanding of how student learning can be supported through enhanced speaking pedagogies. One line of research is to examine the effectiveness of interventions through task repetition and pre-task planning on language learners' metacognitive processes. Metacognitive processes can develop greater self-regulation for out-of-class learning through planning, monitoring and evaluation. They can also increase knowledge about discourse routines and help language learners become familiar with genres or types of spoken texts according to contexts of interaction. Another direction is to examine the affordances of new media through technology. While technology has been exploited for some time now for speaking, its role tends to be limited to pronunciation drills and other types of form-focused instruction. It is worthwhile for researchers to consider

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how technology can be harnessed not just for practising speaking but also providing cognitive support in thinking and planning for learners during speech processing as well as developing discourse skills for face-to-face interactions. Findings from these studies can make significant contributions to the current discussions of teaching speaking and development of effective pedagogies that can scaffold learning processes that would otherwise be overlooked in a speaking class.

Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the helpful comments from Anne Burns and Pauline Foster. Any remaining errors are entirely mine.

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CHRISTINE C. M. GOH is professor of linguistics and language education at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She is a language teacher educator and researcher with interests in listening and speaking (oracy) development, spoken discourse in the English classroom, the role of metacognition in language learning, and the relationship between second language oracy and literacy development. She has published many international refereed journal articles, book chapters and books in these areas.

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