**Understanding Speaking and Pronunciation**

Introduction: The Nature of Speaking and Pronunciation

Good morning, everyone. Today, we are going to explore the complex and dynamic world of speaking and pronunciation. While we often take speaking for granted as a natural part of daily life, it is, in fact, a sophisticated skill that involves much more than simply producing sounds. Speaking is a social act, deeply embedded in cultural and contextual frameworks, and it plays a crucial role in how we communicate, express our identity, and interact with others.

Key Insights:

Discourse Analysis: Speaking is not just about producing grammatically correct sentences; it is about negotiating and achieving meaning in social contexts. This perspective moves us beyond a purely psycholinguistic model of speech, which focuses on underlying mental processes, to one that emphasizes the social and interactive nature of language use.

Corpus Linguistics: Research involving computer analysis of large bodies of naturally produced language has revealed patterns in spoken grammar that differ from those found in written language. This has shifted our understanding of spoken language from a sentence-based approach to one that prioritizes text and function.

Utterances vs. Sentences: In our discussion, we focus on spoken "utterances," which can range from a simple "yeah" to an extended monologue, rather than on formal grammatical units like sentences.

The Complexity of Speaking

Speaking is a multifaceted skill that involves several simultaneous processes:

1. Pronunciation: Every time we speak, even for a short utterance like "Thank you," we engage in various pronunciation elements:

Volume: Speaking loudly or softly.

Speed: Speaking quickly or slowly.

Voice Quality: Using a specific tone or timbre.

Intonation: Employing a particular speech melody.

Stress: Emphasizing certain syllables or words.

Individual Sounds: Pronouncing sounds in different ways.

These elements together create the way we sound to our interlocutors and are crucial for conveying meaning.

2. Identity and Intelligibility:

Identity: Our pronunciation reflects our individuality and signals our membership in specific social groups. It influences how others perceive and judge us.

Intelligibility: At the same time, pronunciation is responsible for whether or not our message is understood. This is a critical concern for second language learners.

3. Online Processing:

Speaking involves "online" processing, meaning speakers must produce and process language in real-time, without the opportunity to revise or edit. This often results in features like:

Independent Clauses: Use of multiple independent clauses linked by conjunctions like "and" or "but."

Formulaic Expressions: Common phrases used as shorthand in familiar situations (e.g., "I don't know how long ago").

Ellipsis: Omission of parts of sentences that are understood from context.

Genres of Speaking

To understand the structure of spoken discourse, we can categorize it into different genres, which are staged, goal-oriented, and social processes. Examples include:

Transactional Communication: Exchanges motivated by the exchange of goods and services (e.g., booking a flight, ordering food).

Interactional Communication: Interactions aimed at creating and maintaining social relationships (e.g., casual conversations, small talk).

Features of Genres:

Staged Structure: Genres unfold in predictable stages. For example, a narrative typically includes:

Abstract: A brief summary of the story.

Orientation: Setting the scene with details of time, place, and characters.

Complication: The main events leading to a problem or crisis.

Evaluation: The speaker's reaction to the events.

Resolution: The outcome of the events.

Coda: A concluding remark that brings the story back to the present.

Lexico-Grammatical Patterns: Different genres are characterized by specific vocabulary and grammatical structures. For example, narratives often use past tense verbs and expressions of time and place.

Micro-Level Interactions

At a micro-level, speaking involves dynamic negotiation between speakers:

1. Exchange Structure:

The classic exchange pattern is Initiation-Response-Follow-up (IRF).

Initiation: A question or statement that starts the exchange.

Response: The answer or reaction to the initiation.

Follow-up: Acknowledgment or evaluation of the response, often using formulaic expressions like "I see," "Really?" or "That's interesting."

2. Turn-Taking:

Speakers must manage when to speak and when to yield the floor to others. This involves:

Self-selection: Choosing to take a turn when there is an opportunity.

Nomination: The current speaker may invite another to speak.

Backchannelling: Listeners use brief responses like "mm-hmm" or "uh-huh" to indicate they are following the conversation.

3. Topic Management:

Speakers negotiate topics through:

Clarifying: Asking for clarification or providing it.

Checking: Verifying understanding.

Summarizing: Recapping key points.

Adapting: Adjusting language to align with other speakers' contributions.

Issues in Pronunciation

Pronunciation is a critical component of speaking that affects intelligibility and social perception:

1. Suprasegmental Features:

Tone Units/Chunking: Speakers divide speech into chunks, marked by pitch movement and pauses, to convey meaning.

Prominence: Emphasizing certain syllables or words to highlight important information.

Intonation: Using pitch patterns to convey meaning, such as:

Contrastive Stress: Emphasizing a word to contrast it with another (e.g., "I said RED car, not GREEN car").

Emotional Intonation: Using dramatic pitch movement to express strong emotions.

2. Stress and Unstress:

Generally, content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) are stressed, while function words (articles, prepositions, pronouns) are unstressed.

3. Sound Segments:

Individual sounds are influenced by:

Assimilation: Sounds becoming more similar to adjacent sounds.

Elision: Omission of sounds.

Linking: Adding sounds to make transitions smoother.

Implications for Pedagogy

Teaching speaking and pronunciation requires careful consideration of several factors:

1. Text vs. Sentence Focus:

While sentence-level study has its merits, a discourse-based approach is crucial for developing communicative competence. This involves:

Understanding generic structures and discourse features.

Practicing conversational moves and turn-taking strategies.

2. Authenticity of Texts:

A range of text types, from scripted dialogues to authentic speech, can be used, each with its own advantages and limitations.

3. Pronunciation Teaching Procedures:

Activities can range from mechanical exercises to communication tasks, including:

Elicited mechanical production (e.g., tongue twisters, "listen and repeat").

Ear training for sound contrasts (e.g., minimal pairs).

Sounds for meaning contrasts (e.g., embedding minimal pairs in sentences).

Cognitive analysis (e.g., discussing assimilation and elision, phonetic training).

Whole brain activities, communication activities, and games.

4. Learner Training:

Encouraging learner autonomy through strategies like awareness-raising questionnaires, learner diaries, and self-recording.

Conclusion

In conclusion, speaking and pronunciation are complex skills that involve much more than just producing sounds. They are deeply intertwined with social, cultural, and contextual factors. By understanding the intricacies of spoken language and employing effective teaching strategies, we can help learners develop the skills they need to communicate effectively in real-world situations.