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## **A directed utterance as a personal educational event and a tool for seamlessness between (L1 and L2) reception and production**

**Abstract:** The chapter addresses the importance of – commonly underrated – students’ directed utterances, generally frowned upon as devoid of individuality and/or linguistic creativity. It presents a twofold benefit of promoting their articulation: first, the personal experiencing and affective significance assigned by students to what they orally reproduce and, second, the lessening of the distance between what students can understand and what they can articulate by themselves. The rationale rests here on the following two chief concepts: in the former case – on the issue of “personal educational event”, a concept derived from educational theory, and in the latter case – the concept of “seamlessness”, well established in the theory of educational measurement. The chapter draws on a selection of comments made by students on how they sense what they hear from others and what they themselves utter. The chapter can be seen as presenting a standpoint against the diminishing of reproduced utterances and speaking in favour of their persistent formulation, with students gaining linguistically, socially and emotionally.

**Keywords:** directed utterance, gap between reception and production, personal educational event, seamlessness

### **1. Terminology: Why directed utterances matter**

The two facts that (a) learning of any school subject invariably necessitates the use of -language and, conversely, (b) language learning unavoidably rests on principles pertaining to schooling imply that there is a great deal to be gained from mutual reinforcement between glottodidactics and the theory of education and their simultaneous pursuit. This chapter presents one of many means through which this interdisciplinary support can be incorporated and which – despite its regular presence in all types of classrooms – lies beyond the scope of theoretical interest and thus remains largely neglected and under-exploited.

The key component implied by the previous paragraph are *directed utterances*, understood here as all language content uttered by language learners in which any two or more elements combined together are ready given by the teacher, textbook or any other source (be it a formulaic expression commonly used in an everyday situation, a highly popular collocation, or even an entire clause frequently

occurring in spoken language). Their function can be seen as reminiscent of words and phrases given to learners in guided translation exercises<sup>1</sup> serving as something of yardsticks facilitating and speeding up the process of providing the missing content. From the learner's perspective, the provided elements offer a sense of the right direction and thus render educational events more pleasurable as achievements in their language studies appear to lie very close at hand and so are more frequently experienced. With the skill of speaking being both most demanding (Cameron 2001: 41), most desirable<sup>2</sup> but least successfully mastered (Marton 1978: 45), all components and measures that support learners' speech are undoubtedly priceless.

The approach to directed utterances as defined above combines the aforementioned two disciplines (and is not confined to language learning only): on the one hand, viewing learning through the prism of what students are capable of uttering and how to direct them in doing so lies within the chief interests of glot-todidactics, but on the other hand, this key educational process is being treated here with a focus laid on two terms falling within the range of subdisciplines of general educational theories: first, *personal educational events*, derived from the concept of critical events (Tripp 1996: 44) referred to learners' personal experience (Daszkiewicz 2015: 95), and, second, the idea of *seamlessness*, long-existing in the theory of educational measurement as a desirable feature of testing consisting in there being no gap (seam) between what given texts are intended to measure and what they in fact verify.<sup>3</sup> It must be added here that the latter concept, when applied to the distance between learners' receptive and productive skills, similarly to how it operates in the realm of measurement, will inevitably retain a theoretical character for it is impossible for the level of learners' ability to speak to equal that of understanding spoken language. Leaving aside arguments what the permanent existence of the gap implies,<sup>4</sup> we can only note here that the term does serve a

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- 1 As Penny Ur notes, the unpopularity of translation as a teaching technique is undeserved, which is seen by the author of this text as a situation very similar to that of directed utterances, which, similarly to translation exercises, can provide very quick and – most importantly – very reliable information on what learners know (Ur 1996: 40).
  - 2 Being perceived as the most practical skill, speaking tends to be the major ambition of language learners, who are frequently unconvinced about the usefulness of other skills, especially writing.
  - 3 The concept has also earned a more extensive application regarding the desired condition of identity of what is being taught, learnt and assessed (cf. e.g. Bond 2008: 1).
  - 4 One of the inferences drawn from the existence of the gap and that people become skilled in understanding language which they cannot produce themselves (Rivers

useful function in showing the direction of instruction, which should never let production lag too far behind reception.

The idea of *personalness* underlying the eponymous type of educational events is closely related to Carl Roger's well-known concept of personal meaningfulness of learning, which encompasses students' satisfaction, progress, their contribution to learning and the very willingness to contribute. It is rather evident that not all educational events do bear these four characteristics although those situations that share only one or two of the four components are still beneficial to the process of learning. In the light of Roger's concept, the personal educational events can be regarded as those where learners signal significance of specific moments by expressing explicitly their satisfaction, recognition of importance of specific subject matter, or, more implicitly but still unquestionably, their involvement and wish to develop. With *personalness* construed in this way, it can be added here that whilst an *educational event* itself can be seen as any incidence of a learner acquiring knowledge, a *personal educational event* is one in which there are both affective characteristics cited above and the process of learning (as opposed to the widely known *critical events* as introduced by David Tripp, understood as any type of turning points, but not necessarily involving specifically any cognitive or affective processes).

The key terms having been outlined, the aim of this chapter can now be validly formulated: its idea is threefold: (a) to study the extent to which directed utterances become personal educational events and the extent to which they are experienced by (English) language learners as motivating them to further effort, (b) to consider the potential of directed utterances in achieving as small a distance between reception and production as it can only be practically feasible, and (c) to promote the application of the educational science in language instruction (and vice versa). The three aims meet in the following observation: it is of paramount importance for the success of learners to sense their control over situations of learning;<sup>5</sup> in the case of language education, for the most wanted skill of speaking to successfully improve, that control needs to be experienced with regard to what the learners utter, which calls for a study of how powerful a tool lies in the

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1978: 62) is that it is worthwhile developing a repertoire of learners' passive vocabulary, which the author of this chapter sees as detrimental to learners as it promotes complacency in the sphere of vocabulary acquisition and prevents its deeper development.

5 An idea derived from psychology and applied to the theory of education, present in e.g. Krzysztof Konarzewski's concept of the student's subjective definition of school dependent on, among other things, how controllable the learning context appears to them, which in turn, determines learners' behaviour (Konarzewski 1995: 99).

hands of language teachers when they prompt students to say specific language elements and thus sense the aforementioned control.

## 2. Hypotheses: How conventionality aids creativity

The key question of whether and how directed utterances build up most positive personal educational events relates to language learners' *subjective* perception of their position and potential in mastering a foreign language. If they find ready-given and/or conventional bits of language to be helpful in building up new sentences, this sensation can be viewed to support their language creativity. Leaving aside the (quantitative) question of how significant a factor this personal impression is in comparison with other variables, it can be noted that this belief sensed by learners is supported by, among other things, taxonomical rationale according to which the ability to synthesize, use in new circumstances or evaluate<sup>6</sup> requires the ability to comprehend, reproduce or apply in typical situations.

The above leads to the chief hypothesis studied here, namely that **directed utterances are positively experienced**, both when uttered by learners themselves and when heard as produced by others. Should this assumption prove right, conventionality in language needs to be viewed as educationally beneficial and recommended in language classrooms.<sup>7</sup> On the basis of regular observations of language learners positively experiencing instances of directed language use, the following four questions have been posed with regard to reception (Q1 and Q2) and production (Q3 and Q4):

- Q1: How do language learners feel about articulating directed utterances?
- Q2: To what extent do language learners consider directed utterances useful?
- Q3: How do language learners feel about others articulating directed utterances?
- Q4: Which qualities of other people's directed utterances do language learners note?

(Q1 and Q3 are meant to address the experiencing of language *content*, i.e. directed sentences, clauses, phrases and words, whilst Q2 and Q4 are *form-oriented*, that is they pertain to language features such as pace of speech, intonation, fluency etc.)

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- 6 The inclusive character of the taxonomical hierarchy proposed first by Benjamin Bloom can safely be applied to the language learners' speaking subskills, the higher of which (unconventional utterances) can only be competently acquired after the lower-order ones have been mastered (Bloom 1956).
  - 7 The functionality of directed utterances in education can be seen as some form of control over the learners' thoughts and manner of expression, which is reminiscent of the aims of self-control over one's own thoughts (and actions), "a process of automatically controlling one's own thoughts in search of unwanted content" (Wojciszke 2002: 145).

The study addressing these questions is a type of search for signals of language learners' personal experience. These questions (similarly to those posed to students) have been formulated in such a way that they do not suggest experience being either positive or negative. The four questions called for a qualitative study in which language learners were prompted to freely comment on their personal experience without the need to understand or use any specific terms. Generally speaking, it was expected that learners would reply to the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> questions revealing their positive emotions and in the case of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> questions, they would emphasize such commonly appreciated qualities as a fast pace of speech, a nice accent etc. proving to be more admirable than the degree of semantic or syntactic creativity. It was assumed that such replies should be seen as implying that directed utterances tend to be unjustifiably underrated and the learners' natural characteristics are not properly exploited.

Below, results of a study will be presented in which the above questions were transformed into more individual-oriented ones, without any technical terms used in them. The language learners comprising the study group have been attending lessons in which they were acquainted with topics through sets of ready-given questions and answers, the former of which were read out loud with handouts provided to them<sup>8</sup> and the latter of which were first suggested by the teacher. Hence, they had had sufficient contact with directed utterances to be in a position to remark on their significance and impact on their language learning. The respondents formed a group of 13 people (9 men and 4 women, aged between 23 and 33, all after tertiary education) taking English lessons on a one-to-one basis, not knowing one another but sharing some common characteristics: they were all professionally active and hoping to improve their language skills, focused on the development of speaking abilities the most. They all – as many other Poles – used to learn English at primary and/or secondary school(s), with the effect of those language studies having been wasted by the respondents' nearly complete lack of oral practice prior to and after their graduation.

### 3. Evidence: when *uttered* means *experienced*

As noted above, the four questions were converted into the following student-oriented queries in which technical items were avoided where possible:<sup>9</sup>

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- 8 The procedure drew on Paivio's theory of double coding, whereby multiplying channels of communication encourages more rapid learning (cf. Paivio 1991).
  - 9 Following the psychological idea of "anchoring", it can be assumed that in Q2 the term *directed utterances* is read and understood through the prism of how Q1 is formulated.

- Q1:** Is uttering reproduced sentences and/or expressions a reason for satisfaction for you or quite on the contrary (and why)?
- Q2:** To what extent do you think articulating directed utterances will let you develop the right pace of speech, intonation etc.?
- Q3:** Do conventional sentences and/or expressions impress you in any way or quite on the contrary (and why)?
- Q4:** When hearing familiar sentences and/or expressions, which qualities of utterances do you feel most strongly about?

To eliminate any possible difficulty in understanding these questions, two measures were taken:

- (i) the questions were translated into Polish, which is the native language of all the respondents who participated in the study, and
- (ii) the set of questions was preceded by a short introduction reading (originally in the Polish language, too):  
 “Let’s divide utterances formulated by you in the course of your English studies into two types:
  - authorial utterances: spontaneous, one’s own, innovative, atypical combinations of words;
  - directed utterances: familiar, conventional expressions, prompted by the teacher.

Table 1 presents a selection of representative replies to the four questions.

*Table 1: Fragments of selected replies to four study questions*

Your own speech		
Q1. ....a reason for satisfaction ...?		
“It’s a reason for satisfaction because it implies that I memorise phrases, sentences and expressions. At my level the aim is to master proper basic constructions, which I won’t invent myself and the easiest way to acquire them is through repetition.”	“[...] I’m aware that if these are sentences prepared by the teacher, they are syntactically and lexically proper and suitable for my level. If I acquire them through repetition, it is a reason for satisfaction.”	“Articulating reproduced sentences and expressions is for me a reason for satisfaction. It makes it possible for me to get to know these phrases and makes me sure that they are correct and I can solidify them by articulating them.”

Q2. ... will help develop the right pace etc. ...?		
"I learn the easiest through repetition. Firstly, it helps me make the constructions <<become second nature>>, and, secondly, it helps to articulate the repeated sentences more smoothly, freely, and with a suitable intonation."	"[...] I memorise sentences/ expressions the easiest through repetition. Doing so, I can gradually focus on correctness of utterances, pronunciation, and, subsequently, on intonation."	"It seems to me that as far as pronunciation is concerned, articulation of directed utterances is very helpful. As for the pace of speech, I'd personally need to repeat a given expression to acquire it better."
Other people's speech		
Q3. ... conventional sentences impressive ...?		
"They impress me because I think that the ability to use simple, not complicated, correct and free language indicates also fluent master of language."	"Yes, they impress me. It means that one uses the language at ease and does not search for complicated expressions."	"Conventional expressions articulated by other people definitely impress me. They often signal the language level I'd like to achieve, and also facilitate communication and understanding."
Q4. ... which qualities cause your emotions ...?		
"I'm very happy when I understand sentences articulated at a fast pace and also those that contain advanced language structures."	"I'm pleased when I understand the construction of a sentences, tense and expressions used in it. I'm happy when I understand utterances of people other than the teacher, a different accent."	"I feel satisfaction from understanding what I hear, but also from the fact that in terms of grammar the sentence construction is understandable to me. I have satisfaction when I understand an utterance including words or phrases which I have recently acquired."

Taking a holistic look at the replies provided, it must first be noted that the respondents (typical learners of English in that they used to learn the language at school without too much conversation, then they had a few-year long break and have now been improving it with more opportunities to practice speech) value directed utterances both in the sphere of production as well as reception. They recognize directed utterances as a key to success and something of a necessary component in attaining greater fluency. Quite independently provided, their replies share the belief in a positive impact of repetition of conventional and common word combinations on the later fluency and ability to express one's ideas in more innovative ways.

A closer study of the replies provided leads to the following observations pertaining to the four questions posed above.

**Q1.** Language learners find directed utterances a source of satisfaction, ease and security (...makes me sure; suitable for my level; a reason for satisfaction), which can be accounted for by directed utterances being the stable and predictable component of language lessons particularly useful to those learners that lack self-confidence and/or score low on risk-taking. It appears that to all the respondents cited articulation of increasingly difficult language elements and word combinations is an experience novel enough for learners not to need to immediately seek any other challenge, test of their creativity or any other form of language adventure.

**Q2.** Language learners (nearly unanimously) see directed sentences as beneficial and necessary for acquiring various subskills (*the aim is to master proper basic constructions; I can focus on correctness; need to repeat to acquire it better*). The respondents cited present directed sentences as bringing them closer to a successful mastery of language and causing the reproduced language items to become the learners' "second nature". The positive experiencing of educational events referred to in the previous paragraph can thus safely be claimed to result from the learners' perception of extensive and long-lasting benefits which seem harder to achieve otherwise.

Considered jointly, the respondents' replies to the first two questions clearly show that language production present in their re-production builds up a personally valuable educational event adding to the learners' sense of achievement and desirable direction.

**Q3.** Language learners derive positive feelings from opportunities to listen to others articulating directed utterances (*they impress me; they signal the language I'd like to achieve*). Although it might seem that directed utterances are elements that language learners would prefer to leave behind, it is quite the reverse as they constitute a level desired and something lying still far ahead.

**Q4.** Language learners pay considerable attention to very specific characteristics of utterances, that is mostly the pace of speech, the right accent, and the language that lies beyond their current abilities (*sentences articulated at a fast pace; satisfaction [...] when grammar is understandable to me*). Hence, their experience here involves the familiar with the unknown: finding out the former in what other people say gives them a pleasant sensation of comprehension (*I have recently acquired*), whilst the recognition of the latter adds to that experience some feelings concerning what other people are capable of doing with the language (*those that contain advanced language structures*), which – provided progress is constantly sensed – itself becomes a driving force and a point of interest on the part of language learners.

Hence, regardless of how conventional directed utterances are, the two questions concerning reception bring it out that they are most positively experienced and by no means regarded as something to be avoided or looked down on. On the contrary – such utterances let language learners contrast what they themselves can articulate with what more experienced learners can do with their speech apparatus.

**Q1 & Q3.** Looking at the language learners' remarks from the perspective of syntactic categories and stretches of text of varying lengths, we can note that there seems to be little difference in how they experience individual words and phrases, clauses, or sentences. Although this point would need to be examined in greater detail, a tentative observation can be made that learners' personal experience of texts of various lengths is generally shared.

**Q2 & Q4.** On the other hand, there occur clearly separate experiences at the level of overall simplicity and complexity, which may be created by both syntactic or semantic, as well as phonetic or pragmatic intricacies. With such items being experienced by language learners as somewhat remote – despite their conventionality, they can be argued to be particularly significant for the learners' perception of their own potential in the language.

#### **4. Conclusions: What gains directed utterances augur**

The above shows unequivocally that language learners gain a great deal on the cognitive and affective strata, with those gains reciprocally supporting each other. Learners master articulation of conventional expressions and sentences, and comprehending the meaning win more self-confidence. Their productive skills are effectively trained and so the gap between reception and production does not grow larger than it is unavoidable by the very character of language and human nature. The incorporation of directed utterances into language classrooms prevents creativity being overestimated and learners' innovativeness being overrated, at the cost of subskills and minor language abilities which must also be trained. The fact that learners articulate words, expressions and sentences is to be seen as a merit in itself. The replies shown above clearly unravel the personal character of directed utterances as educational events in which learners experience what they utter from their own unique position and attach lesser or greater importance to them. The personalness of directed utterances as conveyed by the replies cited above is too apparent and too meaningful for learners to be overlooked.

Among other profits that can be argued to be made likely by directed utterances are social gains consisting in language learners' conviction of being capable of

successful communication (even if based on conventional language only), their contacts with native and non-native speakers of the English language and their higher self-esteem as far as their position on local community and larger society is concerned. Hypothetical as it may sound here, social contacts do in fact start off with users of language trusting in their communicative skills,<sup>10</sup> which – again – cannot be developed without conventional language being practiced and applied. The learners' success is these days more frequently seen as resting heavily on their own perception of learning and achievements, which determines, for instance, the strength of relationship between school education and everyday situations.<sup>11</sup>

Practically speaking, the learners' development going beyond the stage of directed utterances may simply consist in lessening the degree of teacher's assistance, with the students' verbal potential having been strengthened strongly enough to enable them to provide language content independently. It needs to be made clear here, though, that the degree of students' independence and its increase is not to be seen as tantamount to the rising degree of complexity. It is but natural that with children's natural L1 language skills that there increases the amount of words and sentences they are capable of expressing, which their parents and teachers feel pleased about without necessarily the degree of difficulty rising. By analogy – L2 learners' quantitative (semantic) improvement is not to be underestimated if not accompanied by a simultaneous growth in their language syntactic quality.

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10 This statement can be supported by the popularity of certain methods in which language users are instructed to use highly conventionalized language put into question-answer simple social interactions (as is the case with e.g. the Callan method, once hugely popular in Poland).

11 This relationship is argued to be strengthened by autonomous learning (Komorowska 2011: 60), which uses directed utterances, undoubtedly making students more capable to express their minds.

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