

Are Non-Native Speakers Able to Converse?

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After working in the Brazilian Amazon as an EFL instructor for 11 years, I started teaching ESL at a community college in southern California ten minutes from Tijuana, Mexico. In spite of the contextual dissemblance between ESL and EFL, the students expressed basically the same feelings, such as, fear of speaking and making mistakes, lack of confidence in their ability to carry on conversations, and inability to deal with the time constraints of unplanned talk. In a context where the students are immigrants with an urgent need to be able to interact in English, those feelings of inadequacy bring up even more serious consequences since their survival also depends on their ability to participate in unplanned conversations in social situations and service encounters on a daily basis.

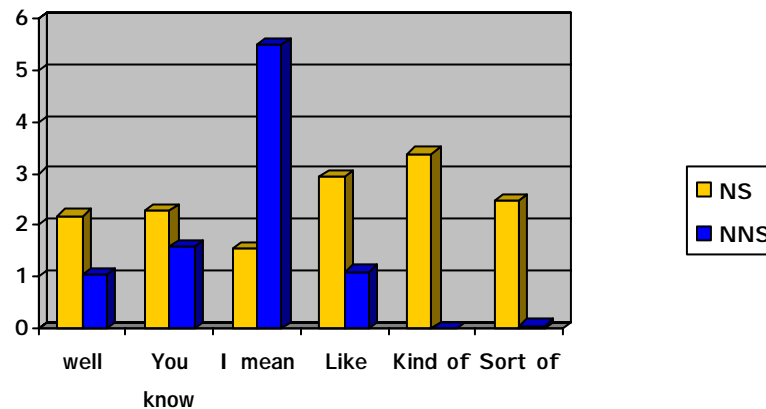
An out-of-the classroom experience came to reinforce my feeling that the current approach to the teaching of L2 speaking was failing to prepare students well to engage in unplanned spoken interactions. When watching TV with my husband, who is a native speaker of English and who had to learn Portuguese as a second language when he lived in Brazil for a year, I was perplexed when he was able to pinpoint within fifteen seconds into an interview that the interviewee, a Russian musician, had obviously lived in the U.S. for quite a while. When inquired why he assumed so, he stated that only people who had lived in a foreign country for a long time could use phrases, such as, *you know* and *I mean* so fluently and appropriately when engaged in conversation. He added that those inserts were not present in textbooks and, therefore, learners who were able to use them were only able to do so due to a long exposure to “real life language.” In the TESOL 2001 conference, the presentations on corpus linguistics and discourse analysis

questioned the authenticity of dialogues in ESL textbooks for the teaching of speaking (see also Richards, 1980; Cathcart, 1989; Carter, & McCarthy, 1995) and asked for changes in the teaching of L2 speaking in light of those study results.

With the awareness that my ESL learners needed more exposure to language at the discourse level (Brazil, 1995; Riggenbach, 1999; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000; McCarthy, 2001,) and also with the emergence of corpus linguistics as a research method (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998; Kennedy, 1998; McEnery & Wilson, 2001; Meyer, 2002), I decided to spend time researching what those two areas within TESOL could inform me in terms of non-native speaker (NNS) discourse only to come to the shocking realization that whereas studies on NS discourse were abundant, research on NNS discourse was almost nonexistent. Therefore, I made the decision to pursue a study on NNS discourse that would enlighten not only my teaching of L2 speaking, but also the materials and tests I designed and the way I assessed, evaluated, and oriented other teachers.

As a full-time classroom instructor, however, I lacked the financial resources needed in order to collect, transcribe and store a spoken corpus from my own L2 learners and compare it to a corpus from native speakers in my own community. In order to circumvent the problem and still be able to move my investigation forward, I decided to use the MICASE corpus, a specialized corpus of academic spoken American English built by the University of Michigan from 1997 to 2001 (Simpson, Briggs, Ovens, & Swales, 2002) for research and teaching purposes. This paper presented at the CATESOL 2005 conference reported a corpus linguistics study that investigated if the nine NNSs in a subcorpus of the MICASE corpus were able to use the discourse markers

*well, you know, and I mean* and the conversational hedges *like, kind of, and sort of* with the same frequency and for the same purposes in conversation as the nine NS in the same subcorpus. The following graph is a summary of the results.



The quantitative data analysis was extremely revealing. The first most noticeable difference is that whereas the NS used conversational hedges more than discourse markers, the NNSs barely used them. In fact, the only conversational hedge that was frequently used by both groups was *like*, and the test of significance revealed no significant difference in the use of that particular conversational hedge between those two groups. However, when it comes to the other two conversational hedges, it is imperative to notice that whereas *kind of* was the most resorted to expression by NS, it was not used by NNSs at all. *Sort of* had very similar results to that of *kind of*, with the minor difference being that there was one instance of use of “sort of” among NNSs. The test of significance for *kind of* and *sort of* showed the difference in frequency of use of those two expressions by NSs and NNSs to be significantly different at the .01 level. Concerning discourse markers, the data analysis uncovered that the NS used *well* and *you know* significantly more than NNSs at the .01 level, whereas NNSs used the discourse marker *I mean* significantly more at the .01 level.

The analysis of use disclosed that although NSs and NNSs used some of those words similarly, there were many uses of the discourse markers and conversational hedges studied that were not resorted to by NNSs at all. The most striking result, though, was the fact that the expressions studied performed a variety of important pragmatic (see Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000 for more information on pragmatic competence) as well as text-processing functions in NS discourse. For instance, they enabled NSs to adjust their speaking according to who they were talking to, what they wanted to convey and how, and also helped NSs gain processing time while constructing the text in online interactions. Those functions may greatly affect the speakers' social relationships, the way they see language, and how they see themselves as learners. Therefore, discourse markers and conversational hedges should be taught to NNSs as part of their ESL education.

In short, all these changes should empower L2 learners and teachers by raising their awareness to the differences between spoken and written modes of communication, enabling them to analyze the spoken language as it is *actually* produced, aiding students in learning and teachers in teaching them to use strategies that will help students cope with the difficulties of processing, constructing, producing and negotiating spoken texts online. This study could ultimately contribute to the knowledge on how to lower learners' affective filter and promote learning by helping L2 learners demystify the spoken language by not seeing it as an aural version of written texts.

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