

Preface

No matter how many books are published dealing with issues related to teaching, learning and testing speaking in a second or foreign language, there will always be a demand for them for the simple reason that developing the ability to successfully get messages across and interact in the target language constitutes one of the greatest challenges to learners and teachers. The main reason for this is that speaking is an extremely complex, multifaceted skill, adept use of which requires sufficient mastery of linguistic resources in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, awareness of pragmatic conventions, familiarity with culture-specific rules of discourse, the capacity for managing the conversation, or the ability to tackle problems which may arise in interaction through the use of various communication strategies, to name but a few. To make matters even more complicated, such systemic knowledge has to be employed in real time, often even in a split second, in situations when the limited attentional resources are at a premium as they have to be simultaneously devoted not only to formulating the communicative intention, choosing the necessary linguistic resources and producing the actual messages, but also to monitoring all the stages of this process, appraising of the context in which interaction takes place, drawing upon the requisite content knowledge, planning what to say next, and simply listening to the interlocutor. Obviously, for successful communication to occur, it is of vital importance that all of these take place to a large extent automatically, which means that speakers should in the main fall back on their implicit rather than explicit second language knowledge, which clearly poses a formidable challenge for language learners, not least because, due to deficiencies in communicative competence, they often have to resort to compensatory mechanisms. In view of these difficulties, it is not an easy task to develop speaking skills in the language classroom in such a way that would ensure striking a balance between fluency and accuracy, preparing learners for the unpredictable contexts in which they will have to communicate, and at the same time taking account of the multitude of individual variables which can impact the effectiveness of instructional procedures. Equally difficult is the issue of evaluating these skills because it is clear that such assessment should be based on regularly

administered oral interviews and be multidimensional, a requirement that is difficult, if not impossible, to meet in most classrooms for logistical reasons.

The present volume addresses many of these issues by taking theoretical considerations and research findings as a point of reference for offering feasible pedagogical proposals which can contribute to more effective teaching, learning and testing of speaking skills in a variety of instructional contexts. It is also a tribute to the late Dave Willis, whose contribution to the field of speaking instruction can hardly be overestimated and whose work on the relationship between grammar and lexis, the lexical syllabus or task-based instruction, to name but a few of his fields of interest, has provided an inspiration for many of the contributors. The book has been divided into three parts, each bringing together papers reflective of its leading theme, ordered according to the specific topics they touch upon. Part I, *Mediating Between Theory, Research and Classroom Practice*, includes five papers whose authors strive to forge the so-much-needed links between theory, research and pedagogy in such areas as enhancing spontaneity in conversation, intercultural communication, the role of oral discourse, the use of hedging devices and applications of identity negotiation theory. Part II, entitled *Empirical Investigations of Factors Influencing Speaking Skills*, focuses on the mediating variables which can affect speaking skills and thus have a bearing on the ways they should be taught, learned and tested. It brings together six empirical studies dealing with willingness to communicate, anxiety, communication strategies, the use of tonal diacritic marking and the role of silence. Finally, Part III, *Teaching and Assessing Speaking Skills*, is devoted to different techniques that can be used for teaching and testing speaking, with five contributions addressing such issues as using videoconferencing and storybooks in the process of instruction, characteristics of interactions in business meetings, designing a curriculum for teaching and evaluating speaking skills at an advanced level, and encouraging self-assessment. We are convinced that thanks to the breadth of the topics covered, the inclusion of original research reports as well as the focus on reconciling theory, research and classroom practice, this edited collection will be of interest to scholars, providing them with an impulse for future empirical investigations, graduate and postgraduate students, searching for appropriate topics for their theses, and classroom teachers, seeking more effective ways in which speaking skills be taught, learned and tested in their classrooms.

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