

Talking the Talk: Professional Fluency for ITAs

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TESOL 2008

Although nonnative English speaking (NNES) TAs spend many hours developing their fluency and pronunciation for teaching, they rarely spend time developing other kinds of professional fluency, including:

- The language to simplify their complex research work (in other words, to give their “elevator talk”)
- The ability to discuss the motivation and reasoning behind their research or general research trends in their field
- The ability to engage in small talk with other researchers and academics

As a part of the language and cultural training for ITAs at the Intercultural Communication Center at Carnegie Mellon, we have developed a series of two-hour seminars that address the cultural and linguistic fluency needed to handle the above tasks. Each seminar works on this professional fluency from a different perspective.

Description of workshops:

- *Elevator Talk* focuses on the need to simplify research topics and projects so that a person outside of that field of research can understand the basic goals and application of the research during a very brief conversation. Activities focus on 1) simplifying dissertation or research titles, 2) watching a video model of a successful “elevator talk”, and 3) developing and practicing a 30-60 second “elevator talk” of the students’ own research interests.
- *Hallway Talk* focuses on the need for ITAs to be able to talk about their fields, professional interests and education in a slightly longer conversation and without preparation (e.g., two colleagues from different departments chat in the hallway of the engineering building). NNES are often unable to explain how their research and professional interests fit into the wider research trends in their field. Students first need to learn how to tailor the explanation to the needs of the audience. Activities focus on: 1) building awareness of the importance of audience, 2) a video model of a graduate student successfully discussing his professional interests, 3) small group fluency building activities.
- *Small Talk* focuses on the need to develop the cultural awareness and techniques for participating successfully in professional small talk in their departments, at conferences, and events around campus. NNES will be perceived as more fluent if they can converse with other professionals in informal situations. Activities focus on 1) raising awareness of the importance of small talk and the unwritten cultural rules /customs surrounding it, and 2) practice of useful techniques for making small talk in the US.

Sample exercises from seminars:

from Elevator Talk seminar:

In this seminar, students focus closely on defining and simplifying technical terms and concepts. The following exercise, adapted from the article “Making Science Understandable to a Broad Audience” (Reis, Richard M. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Friday, July 23, 1999) requires students to reword their dissertation titles so that the meaning is clear to someone outside of the field. They first see models of other students’ titles and simplifications, then they try to simplify their own.

Simplification of Dissertation Titles

From the article “Making Science Understandable to a Broad Audience”:

“Investigating Cytoskeletal Dynamics in the Development of Epithelial Cell Polarity” can be simplified to “How Do Cells Know Up From Down”.

The following are all titles of dissertations or research projects that Carnegie Mellon students have been involved in. The students simplified the titles in this way:

1. A Hierarchical Probabilistic Model for Novelty Detection (Computer Science)—*Using what you already know to identify what you don't know*
2. A Mechanism to Mitigate Adverse Selection in Capital Budgeting (Business)—*How managers can choose projects for the benefit of the shareholders*
3. Scheduling K power control in wireless networks (Electrical & Computer Eng.)—*Efficient sharing of limited resources in wireless communication networks*
4. (Simplify your dissertation title here)

from Hallway Talk seminar:

Students watch a videotape of a graduate student discussing his professional interests, then answer questions about the student’s motivations, the applications of his research, and the way he uses rewording and defining of concepts to simplify technical information for his listeners. Students then practice discussing professional topics using the following exercise.

Practice Activity: An academic audience will expect you to have concise, easy to understand answers to the following questions. They will expect you to reword and define, and to aim the content of your answer at the appropriate level. Your answer should explain: 1) What are you doing? and 2) Why should your listener care?

- What is the motivation for your current work or research project?
- What are some of the important recent trends in your field? How does your work fit into those trends?
- Discuss an important person in your field and the difference that he/she has made in the field.
- Discuss a research project you have been involved in.

from Small Talk seminar:

We first discuss the importance of small talk in the US, in specific for academics making connections to people in their departments and with other researchers. We then review acceptable topics (weather, sports, events happening at time of speaking, etc.). We also practice how to start and maintain small talk through volunteering opinions or assumptions about the topic.

Here is one technique we discuss for maintaining small talk and the exercise that accompanies it.

The "string of pearls" technique is used to connect one thought to another. It is used to start a conversation, then to keep it going. A good way to connect thoughts is to volunteer an assumption about the person. Here is an example:

A: Oh, you're from China, aren't you?

B: Yes, I am. I'm from Beijing, which is a much bigger city than Pittsburgh.

A: Oh, it must have been hard to adjust when you came here!

B: Yes, especially to the food! But now I like it. Are you from Pittsburgh?.....

Notice that person A volunteered two assumptions about person B. This helps to maintain the flow of conversation. Look at how A used phrases like "aren't you?" and "that must have been..." to encourage a response from B. Person B volunteered some "free information", rather than give just a "yes" or "no" reply to each statement. This is a good way to maintain the conversation.

Practice using the string of pearls technique in the following situations. Make sure you make at least three statements per speaker:

1. You are sitting and waiting for this seminar to begin. How can you start a conversation with the person sitting next to you?
2. You are sitting at the University Center after this seminar when another student from the class sits down near you. How do you start a conversation with that person?

For more information about these seminars, contact Rebecca Oreto at: rebholz@andrew.cmu.edu.