

Teacher language in the German EFL classroom: a model for spontaneous speech?

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Spontaneous speaking is considered an essential and yet often the most challenging skill in acquiring a foreign language. Recent research has indicated that a fluent and natural speaking style including the adequate use of conversational features (such as, e.g., discourse markers) is just as important to be accepted by an interlocutor as grammatical accuracy and therefore a prerequisite for successful communication (e.g. Brandt & Götz 2011). Studies on the use of some of these features by advanced (German) learners of English find that they use them significantly less often than native speakers (e.g. Götz 2013, Gilquin 2016, Rosen 2019). These studies plead for more consideration of typically spoken features and fluency-enhancing strategies in teaching and suggest that the spoken input of teachers could be an important stepping stone to a more adequate use of conversational features by learners. To date, however, no study has investigated the spoken input students are actually exposed to at German secondary schools.

To remedy this situation, this paper investigates which features of a “conversational grammar” (Biber et al. 1999) can be found in teacher language as represented in a 425 000-word corpus of 105 transcribed English lessons, recorded at German secondary schools between 2003 and 2004. The focus is on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the use of discourse markers, stance adverbials, question tags and formulaic utterance launchers in comparison with British teacher language included in the classroom section of the British National Corpus. The results show that there is an overall tendency for such features to be used less frequently by German teachers of English compared to native-speaker teachers. More importantly, the evidence suggests that matters are more complex once individual features, their functional use and the input of individual teachers are under investigation. In a second step, the study therefore aims to determine whether the quality of teacher input has an effect on learners’ use of conversational features. The results are taken as an indication that the use of some features might indeed be teaching-induced. In general, however, teacher input in the German EFL classroom does not seem adequate enough to serve as a useful model for spontaneous speaking.

References

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