

Developing speaking skills

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Summary

In the preceding chapters we have looked at teaching the receptive skills of reading and listening and also at teaching the productive skill of writing. In that chapter we noticed some of the differences between speech and writing, including the fact that speech is often spontaneously produced in a very limited time frame. We will now look at speaking skills in a little more detail. Of course, we must remember that speaking is often integrated with reading, writing and particularly listening.

Speaking in language teaching

Speaking has already been discussed in this book in several places. When we looked at grammar and vocabulary lessons, we noted how important it was for learners to have oral practice. We also looked at activities that could be based on output from learners – largely spoken output – and then reflected on and analysed by the learners, giving them the chance to notice new vocabulary and grammar patterns, as well as looking at the mistakes made. The starting point of this kind of activity is clearly speaking. When looking at receptive skills lessons, we noticed that frequently there are stages of those lessons that provide opportunities for learners to discuss or react to what they have heard or read.

Speaking has often been dealt with in a similar way in language teaching – something which is covered sufficiently by virtue of being so bound up in the teaching of everything else. Paradoxically, although many learners

feel that being able to communicate effectively through speech is their main priority, when speaking is the main aim of a lesson it can sometimes lead to dissatisfaction. Some learners can't quite see the point of doing something in the classroom that they could quite easily do over a coffee, and similarly, teachers can feel guilty because they have not taught something with a clear learning outcome that can be held up as justification for the lesson.

However, experience shows that dedicated speaking skills lessons can be useful. Realistic classroom speaking activities could be seen as an opportunity to rehearse the things learners want to do outside the classroom, but in a safe environment, where mistakes can be learned from rather than leading to difficulties and embarrassment. We will look at the reasons people speak and what speaking involves in order to identify what needs to be taught in a speaking skills syllabus. This will allow us to consider how learners can be helped to develop oral fluency, accuracy, and to incorporate increasingly sophisticated features of language into their speech. But we will begin by briefly looking at how speech may vary in different situations.

Speaking in different situations

Think of all the times you have spoken in the last twenty-four hours. In each case, try to think of the purpose behind the interaction. Why were you speaking?

Now look at these situations. What is the difference between:

- talking to a friend and making a speech at their wedding
- talking to a friend and talking to your boss
- talking to a friend and talking to the newsagent when you buy a paper

When you are ready, read the commentary on page 86.

As we can see, there are many reasons why people speak to each other. One primary use of language is to establish and maintain social relationships. We say 'hello' to people when we meet them, exchange small talk about the weather, work, sport and family relationships. As part of this social use of language we also try to entertain each other by making jokes and telling anecdotes and stories. We may also share views and opinions on a variety of subjects, with those involved introducing and switching topics regularly.

Language is also used to share or pass on information. In these contexts there will be a more predictable agenda. During a business meeting, for example, we would be surprised (and perhaps irritated) if participants continually introduced unrelated and irrelevant topics.

In both social and work contexts, language may also be used to discuss options and solve problems. In addition, we use language to manage the interaction itself. For example, we can say when we don't understand something or haven't heard part of what was said. We can also use language to invite others to speak (*What do you think, Debbie?*). We can therefore see that we use language to smooth the interaction process.

So, people speak to maintain existing social relationships and to make new ones. They also speak to pool and exchange information and to ease the performance of transactions. These categories are broad and could be subdivided further, but they cover some of the main reasons people speak.

What speaking involves

Like the other skills we have looked at, speaking involves many different things. We have already seen that the spoken language used in some contexts may be fairly predictable (think of checking in at an airport, for example) and in others it may be unpredictable. In some contexts, people may speak for a short time and other people may rapidly 'take the floor', with turns being taken very quickly as happens in most social conversation. At other times, people may have to speak for an extended time.

Look at the following questions and try to answer them.

- 1 In what ways may casual conversation be harder to take part in for a learner than giving a presentation?
- 2 To what extent does speaking involve a knowledge of vocabulary and grammar?
- 3 When listening to someone speaking a foreign language, what other things can make it difficult for the listener(s) to understand?
- 4 To what extent can learners correct their own mistakes as they speak?
- 5 What other knowledge, apart from vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, does a speaker need to have?

When you are ready, read the commentary on page 86.

So, in order to express what they want to, speakers recall the appropriate words and organise them into units (using vocabulary and grammar awareness). They must also move lips, tongue and so on to form the appropriate sounds, monitor what comes out and be prepared to correct it. In addition to all this, speakers need an awareness of cultural conventions, which may limit what it is appropriate to say or how something is expressed. For native speakers this all happens exceptionally quickly, but is much slower when operating in a new language. As a result, even fairly high-level learners can find it difficult to participate effectively when in unpredictable conversational settings.

What learners need to learn

Here is a summary of what learners need to be able to do in order to speak effectively in a variety of situations. Remember, speaking often happens under very strict time constraints which can add pressure and make even apparently simple tasks quite stressful and difficult.

- learners need to carry out ‘routine’, predictable exchanges – for example, when greeting someone or asking for directions
- learners need to take part in unpredictable exchanges – for example, casual conversation
- learners need to know such things as when it is appropriate to speak, how they can politely interrupt and how direct contributions should be
- learners need to monitor what they say, so that they can rephrase parts as necessary
- learners need to be able to negotiate and manage exchanges – inviting others to speak, asking for repetition, and so on
- learners need to develop strategies to cope when they are unable to express exactly what they want, such as paraphrasing skills
- learners need to select appropriate vocabulary and use grammar to express and organise what they want to say
- learners need to speak with intelligible pronunciation

In order for learners to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to become confident speakers in English, teachers need to provide plenty of varied opportunities to use the language communicatively in the classroom. Some potential activities are described later in the chapter.

Some practical considerations

Before we move on to look at some activities, we will consider some practicalities involved in their planning and execution. Look at the statements below and decide if you agree or disagree with them. You could base your decisions on any experience you have had as a language learner, or on what you have read so far in this book.

- 1 All speaking lessons should be conducted in open class situations – with the teacher addressing the whole class or one learner addressing the class.
- 2 Pair and group work will only lead to learners learning the mistakes of their colleagues.
- 3 All errors should be corrected.
- 4 What the learners say is not important – it is only important that they speak English correctly.
- 5 As soon as the learners start talking about something other than the given task, the teacher should ensure that the learners refocus on what they should be doing.
- 6 All learners must speak for approximately the same length of time in all lessons.
- 7 Teachers should allow learners time to prepare before a speaking activity begins.
- 8 Learners should work in English only at all times.

When you are ready, compare your ideas with the commentary on page 86.

Try it out!

Select a simple speaking activity, such as a discussion, that can be done in small groups.

Build interest in the topic(s) you choose to discuss, put the learners into small groups and monitor the activity. Ask some learners to report back their discussions and then give some feedback on the language that you heard (good examples, correction etc.).

A few days later, repeat the activity above, changing what is to be discussed.

Before putting the learners into groups, ask them to sit quietly for a few minutes and think about what they want to say. They can make notes, but should not write full sentences. They can also use dictionaries or ask you for help. Then proceed as above.

- Do you notice any difference in how well the two activities worked?
- Was one more successful than the other?
- Did the planning time make any difference?
- What have you learned from this experience?

Some ideas for teaching speaking

Sentence stems

Dictate the beginning of five or six sentences. The learners must write what they hear and complete the sentences for themselves. For example:

The teacher dictates:

In the future I hope to...

My perfect job would be...

After the lesson, I...

The learners complete the sentence stems appropriately, for example: *'In the future I hope to travel around the world.'* The teacher then puts the learners into groups to discuss the ways in which they have completed the sentences and to ask each other questions about what they have written: *'What countries would you like to go to?'* and so on. The teacher listens to the discussion and later gives feedback.

Role play

Set up a role play. For example: *There is a proposal to build a new chemical factory in a town. Some residents think this is a good idea because there is currently high unemployment. Some residents think this is a bad idea because they are concerned about the risks of pollution.* Each student is given a card with their role described. For example, there are two representatives from the company, concerned parents, a doctor, unemployed workers and so on. The learners are given time to prepare what they want to say and then they perform the role play. The teacher monitors and only becomes involved if communication breaks down. Feedback is given after the role play.

Managing a conversation

Teach and practise expressions such as:

So, do you mean that...?

I didn't understand the last thing you said.

Could you speak a little slower, please? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Sorry, you go first.

This enables learners to manage conversations more effectively.

Moving discussion

The teacher organises the room so that there are two concentric circles. The learners sit facing each other. The teacher writes three topics on the board such as: *Blood sports should be banned. Why I love my country. Tourism is nearly always a bad thing.* The learners work in pairs (with the person they are facing) and must choose one of the topics which they then discuss for three minutes. The teacher then stops the activity and writes two or three more topics on the board. All the learners in the outer circle move around one place and with their new partner decide on which topic they want to talk about – and again they have three minutes in which to do so. The activity continues until all the learners in the outer circle have spoken to all the learners in the inner circle. The teacher then conducts a feedback session, including some correction of errors.

Survey

Set up a mingling activity whereby learners briefly interview other members of the class. They could find out information such as what people had for breakfast, how they travel to school or favourite pastimes. After the survey, results can be reported back.

Alibi

Set up a situation such as this one: *The institution you work in was broken into last night between the hours of 8.00 and midnight and the police are investigating.* Members of the class are suspects. Nominate two learners to leave the room for a few minutes – their task is to provide an alibi for each other by agreeing the details of where they went and what they did last night. One learner re-enters the room and is quizzed by the rest of the class. When this has finished the second 'suspect' re-enters and is similarly interviewed. If their stories coincide, they are innocent, if not...

Telling stories

Ask learners to prepare stories in small groups. These could be based on a particular genre (a ghost story, for example), or set of vocabulary, or some pictures. Allow time for the learners to prepare, and then ask them to tell their stories to other learners.

Moral dilemmas

Set up some moral dilemma type situations and ask learners to discuss them. For example:

Your company is bidding for an important government contract, winning it will secure jobs and even create some new ones. A very important government official suggests that you pay \$100,000 directly to her to help win the contract. What would you do?

Solving problems

Set up a problem-solving activity, for example, a survival game in which learners must work together to develop a survival strategy. Ask learners to imagine that the light aircraft they have been travelling in has been forced to make an emergency landing. There are items in the plane that they can take and they must put them in order of usefulness. The items include such things as water, a box of matches, a gun and so on. The learners think for a couple of minutes about what they think is important and then work in groups to discuss their strategy and the potential value of each item. The teacher monitors the activity and later invites each group to report on their decisions before conducting feedback.

Information gaps

Set up an activity in which each learner has some information, but not all the information required. For example, the learners plan a trip to New York and each member of the group has different information about places to stay. They must share their information so that together they can decide on the most suitable accommodation.

Keep talking

The class is divided into teams. Each learner is given a different topic and must try to speak for 60 seconds on that topic without excessive hesitation. If they are successful, they score a point for their team. If they only manage to speak for a part of the time, a member of the other team has to speak for the remainder of the time to score a point.

Ask me my questions

Learners each write three questions that they themselves would like to answer about their lives. They then give the

questions to another learner, who uses them as a basis of an interview.

It is worth reiterating that in all of the activities described here, speaking combines with other skills, principally listening. In the previous section we looked at how preparation time can be beneficial to learners. Some of these activities, such as *Sentence stem* and *Alibi* have preparation time built into them and in other cases it can be added. As well as allowing preparation time, repeating tasks can also be very beneficial. Again, research suggests that repeating the same task with different partners can also help to improve the accuracy, fluency and complexity of the language used. Many of these activities would lend themselves to this, with learners doing essentially the same task with different partners.

Some learners respond particularly well to activities in which they can express their own thoughts, ideas and feelings. *Sentence stems*, *Moral dilemmas* and *Ask me my questions* are examples from the above group that allow for this, and information gap type activities can be easily personalised, where learners discuss information that is true for them (their favourite movies, pastimes and so on). On the other hand, some learners may find expressing opinions culturally challenging and may prefer activities of the role play type, where they only express the opinions of the character they take on. Role plays also allow the teacher to create situations where there is a power imbalance between participants (a boss and an employee, for example). Such a hierarchy impacts on what language is appropriate to use, and without using role play it can be hard to recreate in a classroom.

Several of the activities described above are very flexible and can be easily adjusted for level. For example, if learners are to construct a story, the teacher can easily adjust the amount of support that is offered through doing such things as pre-teaching relevant vocabulary, or giving a model story from which the structure can be copied. Role plays can be adjusted for level through the choice of scenario and the amount of support that is given before learners act it out.

Some learners may not expect to do extended pair and

group work – it may run contrary to their previous experiences of classrooms. In these cases, a teacher can usefully spend a little time giving a rationale for why they are using the strategy and may also wish to introduce pair and group gradually, working with short activities before building up to longer ones.

Both teachers and learners often see grammar and speaking lessons as being completely separate entities, but we can see from these examples that this is very far from the case. All speaking activities will involve the learners using the grammar and vocabulary that they already know. The feedback given on activities allows teachers to work on this grammar development, providing not just correction, but also new bits of language that seem useful and appropriate.

Speaking is a very important skill for most learners. Some, however, feel shy and embarrassed when called on to speak, and others, while being fairly fluent, make so many errors that understanding their meaning can be difficult. Speaking lessons allow learners to practise their existing skills in a protected and safe environment. This can increase their confidence, and therefore boost their performance when they have to speak in a real-world situation. By supplying new bits of language and using correction techniques effectively, the teacher can help learners to perform better than they could without support. As learners improve, so the support can be gradually withdrawn.

Summary

- Most learners feel that developing speaking skills is essential.
- Dedicated speaking activities and lessons can be very useful.
- The classroom provides an ideal, 'protected' environment in which learners can develop confidence in speaking English.
- Teachers need to provide a variety of speaking activities to reflect the variety of speaking activities learners will engage in in real life.

11 Commentary

Speaking in different situations

- **talking to a friend and making a speech at their wedding**

A speech will be characterised by a long turn (a speaker speaking without interruption), whereas when we talk to friends there will be short turns where people say a few words and then someone else contributes and so on. The content of a wedding speech will be dictated partly by tradition – there are things the audience expects to hear and an order in which they will appear – but when speaking to a friend there will be no particular agenda. People will speak about whatever seems important or interesting at the time.

- **talking to a friend and talking to your boss**

It is likely that different topics will be discussed in these situations. In a work context, there is likely to be a set topic and issues outside of those related to work may not be acceptable. The formality of the language will also vary because the power relationship between friends is equal, but this is not the case when speaking to a boss. This may affect who initiates conversational exchanges (typically the person with more power or authority), the length of turns, as well as the choice of vocabulary used.

- **talking to a friend and talking to the newsagent when you buy a paper**

The discussion with the newsagent may be ‘transactional’ in nature. S/he asks for a certain amount of money, you give it, say thank you, and leave. There is unlikely to be much development beyond what is essential for the transaction to be completed. This is obviously different to speaking to a friend, where there is no transaction as such, and the purpose is to build or maintain social relationships.

What speaking involves

- 1 Although the presentation calls for an extended period of speaking, at least the learner will have time to prepare and to practise what they want to say, unlike in conversations. They could use grammar reference books and dictionaries, as well as practising pronunciation of particular words or phrases beforehand. In a presentation the learner will also be able to focus totally on speaking, whereas conversation involves

listening and decoding what others are saying and having to respond very quickly.

- 2 Learners need to know enough vocabulary to express what they want and also to organise it in a way which the listeners can understand. Therefore, vocabulary and grammar are essential. However, that does not mean that language necessarily has to be error free. A learner may communicate effectively even if their language is inaccurate in places.
- 3 Poor pronunciation (see Chapter 7) may make listening difficult.
- 4 They may be able to correct themselves to some extent, but if they pay a lot of attention to accuracy they may lose fluency (speaking without too many pauses and hesitations) and listeners may become frustrated. Native speakers frequently pause and sometimes correct or rephrase what they say.
- 5 As well as an ability to use vocabulary, grammar and vocabulary effectively, learners need to understand cultural norms and expectations. For example, the strategies we use for interrupting others, showing disapproval, inviting others to speak, and knowing how direct we can be all vary in different cultures. Therefore, learners may not be able to transfer appropriately their awareness of their own language to the speaking of another. This is particularly problematic with English. It is used in so many diverse areas that it is hard to identify universal cultural norms.

Some practical considerations

- 1 This is not the case. Parts of lessons may be conducted in this way – typically the reporting back and feedback stages – but learners will simply not get enough speaking practice if only one person can speak at a time. Also, it will encourage the learners to rely on being prompted to speak by the teacher rather than practising strategies of turn taking, interrupting and other features of normal conversation. Ideally, much of the time should be spent with the learners speaking to each other in pairs and groups, although there may be contexts where this is problematic, such as where learners are in very large classes or are unfamiliar with pair and group work.
- 2 There is little evidence supporting the idea that learners will pick up a lot of mistakes of others and incorporate them

into their own language. However, it is something that some learners worry about and so they need to be reassured that the teacher is listening to what they say and will pick up on mistakes later in the lesson. Monitoring pairs and groups is very important.

- 3 This is not necessarily the case. Errors that interfere with meaning need to be addressed, but speaking effectively demands a degree of confidence and too much correction can destroy this. Teachers need to be sensitive in their approach and to treat learners as individuals. Some learners may benefit from a lot of correction while others may need very little.
- 4 Both aspects are important – what learners say and how they say it. Teachers can usefully get learners to report back on what they said (this is important because it demonstrates the value of communication and that language is about more than the manipulation of certain forms). Learners can also benefit from feedback on **how** they said things (the form of the language).
- 5 Many teachers would agree with this, although it should be remembered that in most conversations the topic does change rapidly and therefore this can be quite useful practice, assuming that it is done in English.
- 6 This is not necessarily true. Certainly all learners should be given the opportunity to speak, but some may be naturally more inclined to listen than perform and may still benefit from the activity. If learners are shy about speaking in front of the whole class, pair work and group work can be a very useful way of building confidence.
- 7 This can be a very useful strategy. Research evidence suggests that it will result in more fluent, accurate and complex (in terms of grammar and vocabulary) language being used. However, of course, when learners communicate outside class time, they may not have such a luxury and so the teacher may decide not to use this strategy all the time.
- 8 This remains the received wisdom in most teaching contexts and certainly there would be little point in having an activity designed to practise English conducted entirely in another language. However, some learners need occasional support best given in their own language. For example, they may have an important point they wish to make that can be expressed and then translated. Sometimes, a learner may just need help with a single word and can then keep going in English.