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Teaching Speaking

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BEFEKTETÉS A JÖVŐBE

The present material is based on some commonly accepted and ubiquitously circulating ideas, which are also expanded upon in Ur (1981, 1996 and 2012), Harmer (2007) and Hedge (2000), and on the author's own teaching experience, as well as her experience in pre- and in-service training of teachers.

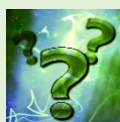
1. Introduction

In language teaching, the main four skill areas discussed are reading, listening, writing and speaking. Speaking and writing are productive skills, since they are based on the language learners' ability to produce oral and written texts, while reading and listening are receptive skills and are based on the language learners' comprehension of written and aural texts.

The focus of the present unit is speaking as a skill. We are going to explore

- what the aim of speaking activities are in the foreign language classroom,
- what makes speaking activities successful,
- what problems the learners might experience with speaking,
- how teachers can best support their learners in speaking.

Before you read on, do Thinking task 1 below.



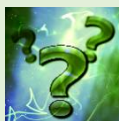
Thinking task 1

Think about *your own experience as a language learner*. Thinking about your English classes:

- a) How much did you speak in English?
- b) When did you speak in the lessons and why? What kinds of things did you (have to) say?
 - Was it mainly answers to questions from the teacher or in the coursebook?
 - Or were you also involved in some kind of communicative activity?
 - Did the communication activities seem natural or rather artificial?
- c) How did you feel while speaking?
 - Did you enjoy it?
 - Were you anxious and shy?
 - Did you sometimes feel forced to speak when you did not feel like doing so?
 - Or, on the contrary, would you have liked to talk much more, only there was no time or chance to do that?

Take your time to think about your answers. Make short notes so that you can remember these thoughts, because you will need your ideas later on.

1. The aim of speaking activities in class



Thinking task 2

Why exactly do you think you will want to give your learners speaking practice activities?

This question seems confusingly self-evident at first sight. However, ‘teaching speaking’ does not simply equal throwing in a topic and telling your learners to speak about it – *as a teacher, you will need to have precise aims in your mind when designing or selecting activities for classroom use.*

One obvious aim is to promote your learners’ *oral fluency*, i.e. improve their ability to express themselves with ease. But there are some further ways in which speaking activities contribute to the complex process of language learning. As a teacher you should be aware of these and make it your conscious aim both when designing or selecting speaking tasks for classroom use and while conducting these activities in class.

Before you read on, pause and think what these additional benefits of class speaking activities might be.



Key

1. Language benefits



a) Practice and consolidation of already learnt material

Producing language, that means speaking and writing it, serves as a kind of practice and consolidation of the material that has been learnt so far. In order to learn the various language items, the brain needs more than simply receiving input through reading and listening – it also needs the ingraining effect of practising it through production (and, ideally, corrective feedback from a teacher or competent speaker).



b) Venturing beyond current boundaries

Attempting to produce utterances in a foreign language pushes the learners beyond the borders of their current language knowledge. When they want to express a thought for which they do not have the language form, they are forced to experiment with the language. Such gaps in their knowledge, coupled with a desire to express something, creates a need on behalf of the learner, which acts as a kind of vacuum and ‘sucks in’ the relevant language form when the learner looks it up in some kind of source, or when it is supplied by the teacher or other competent interlocutor. In simple terms: we are much more likely to learn and remember items that we need or want or are interested in.

2. Additional benefits

Penny Ur (1981:3) mentions two interesting and valid aims of speaking activities (which she calls ‘discussions’, using the term in its broadest possible sense):



a) Learning from content

Through the preparation for speaking activities, the actual exchange of ideas, and the ensuing feedback session, learners are likely to pick up information that is new to them, or get to know viewpoints that they have not thought of so far.



b) Learning to participate in communication

When performing carefully planned, prepared and executed speaking activities, learners’ general communications skills might improve or be fine-tuned: ideally, they learn and practise how to interact in a cooperative and constructive way.

They also learn a range of phrases in English which they need in order to communicate e.g. various discourse markers for starting, ending and signposting a conversation, phrases to use when they wish to interrupt a speaker, or ask for repetition or clarification, and ways of paraphrasing to deal with the problem of missing language items in their repertoire.

2. What makes speaking activities successful?

Now open and do Task 1 in the attached folder before reading on. Please make sure you answer all the questions before you read the Notes below.



Notes

If you thought about the questions in Task 1 really carefully, you probably felt that rather than agreeing or disagreeing, you would have preferred to answer ‘I agree but...’ or ‘I disagree, but...’.

Read the following notes and see whether you agree with them.

1. A speaking activity is successful if the students talk a lot.

Seems obviously true - it is, however, a bit vague. First of all, *mere quantity of language does not make communication successful. The contributions have to be relevant and relatively well-formed for the conversation partner(s) to understand and enjoy.* Secondly, when teaching groups, it is also important to ensure that the members of the group participate roughly evenly. Some people are naturally more talkative and dominant, others rather shy or reserved – and teachers should respect people’s personality types. Nevertheless, it is the teacher’s responsibility to invite and encourage quieter participants to contribute and thus enjoy the above benefits of speaking activities.

2. Speaking activities need careful and detailed preparation.

This is often true: *the importance of careful planning and preparation of the lesson on behalf of the teacher cannot be emphasised enough.* However, in the course of the lesson, *spontaneous opportunities might arise* for various types of communication: a learner might ask a question and then enter into a discussion of the teacher’s answer, learners might start to discuss or even argue about some point, somebody might tell a story or a joke which you can invite the others to react to, etc. It is advisable to grab the opportunity and exploit these, as they are no less than natural, learner-initiated speaking activities – and as such they might occasionally turn out to be better than you could ever design in advance!

3. Ideally learners speak accurately.

This goal is rather elusive. For one thing, we have to bear in mind the very *tricky question of what counts as 'accurate' in a language* (English) that is spoken by so many communities scattered across the globe, and which only has descriptive grammars and no central prescriptive one. Also, students learn English for various purposes, and for many of them it is sufficient that their conversation partner can understand them with ease. These learners do not see the point of aiming for higher levels for accuracy, and they consider it a waste of time and effort.

It is important to get to know your learners' goals and needs precisely – and calibrate your expectations and the focus of your course accordingly.

4. Do not correct the learners during a speaking activity. It gets in the way of free expression and fluency.

Some teachers think that correction should never be applied in a fluency activity. They argue that it obstructs the free flow of conversation on the one hand, and deprives the learners of the pressure to express what they want with whatever linguistic resources they have at their disposal. There is some truth in both arguments, nevertheless they are not universally true. *It may be worth correcting recurring and important errors* – especially if we predict that the student is going to repeat this error in the rest of the speaking activity a few times more – thereby potentially drilling the incorrect form into his memory. Also, when the learners are stuck for an expression, making them laboriously paraphrase and circumscribe might kill off their motivation to speak rather than provide them with useful practice. In both cases, of course, *teacher correction should be brief and as inobtrusive as possible*. No lengthy explanations during fluency practice!

5. Oral drilling of sentence patterns is an old-fashioned way of teaching grammar. It does not improve communicative skills.

Truly, oral drills are no more fashionable to the extent that they were in the days of the audio-lingual method. When 'communicative language teaching' as a method rose and made the previous methodologies fall, for a long while oral drills were considered as outright counterproductive and to be discouraged. Nowadays, however, they are creeping back into the most successful and popular coursebooks – without the defamed name, of course. For example OUP's English File series, which advertises itself with the slogan 'The course that gets the students talking' or, the newer editions, 'the best way to get students talking', advises the teacher to make students practice saying the sentences after the successful completion of a grammar or vocabulary exercise. *Drilling in words, expressions and useful sentence patterns provides the learners with a degree of practice and automatization when producing sentences on their own*. It is also of tremendous help for the learners if they are practised in what we could call 'functional language' or 'everyday conversational utterances' or 'formulaic language'. These are relatively fixed expressions that natives use in various everyday situations, such as how to introduce oneself, how to invite somebody and how to

react to the invitation, how to ask somebody for help, etc. Drilling in a set of these helps the learner react quickly and spontaneously when the situation arises, giving the speaker some time to think up the rest of what he wants to say.

6. Writing does not help to improve speaking abilities. These are two separate skills.

Writing and speaking are both productive skills and can mutually reinforce each other. When writing, either guided or freely, learners have time to plan and carefully formulate their ideas, recalling learnt but forgotten language items or looking up unknown ones. All this can serve as a kind of preparation for speaking activities, where there is no thinking time at the learner's disposal.

7. The best way to improve learners' speaking abilities is to give them as many different activities as possible. Aim for variety.

Variety is an important factor in successful teaching: it maintains interest, and makes sure that a number of different aspects are covered in a number of different ways. However, sometimes real practice starts where fun ends: when you have just completed and discussed a speaking task with your learners, occasionally *asking them to do the same task again*, this time trying to produce an improved version of it, *might bring several benefits*. When learners do a speaking task the first time round, they are concentrating more on the content (*what* they are saying) rather than on the language (*how* they are formulating it) and might feel slightly nervous about the whole experience. The second time round, however, they will feel more relaxed and also have more attention capacity for how they are saying what they are saying. Repetition is key to learning – and this applies to learning to express ourselves in English as well.

3. Learners' problems with speaking

If you ask teachers what they consider a successful speaking activity, they are often very general and vague in their answers. If, however, you ask them to turn it around and list what makes them dissatisfied with the outcome of a speaking activity in class, they can immediately pinpoint what seem to be common problems:

1. learners don't speak or not enough and/or
2. what they say is unsatisfactory in terms of the range and accuracy of the vocabulary and structures that they use.

Now open and do Task 2 in the attached folder before reading on. Please make sure you answer all the questions before you read the Notes below.



Notes

Some ideas to consider:

Lack of topic knowledge

a) 'I don't know what to say'

Reason 1: *They really have nothing to say at that point.* They do not have (enough) background knowledge to have ideas or opinions that they could communicate in connection with the topic in question.

Reason 2: *Some people are by nature more of the quiet, reticent type:* they don't reveal their thoughts or feelings readily. They only talk if there is a real practical need for it, and even then do so as briefly as possible.

Personality type

Inhibitions

Reason 3: *Some learners have considerable inhibitions* about certain elements of the learning experience – and speaking is perhaps the most vulnerable to such inhibitions. These might have their roots in past learning experience, or the current dynamic of the learner group or even the teacher's behaviour or attitude.

Reason 4: Ur emphasizes (1981:6, 2012:121-122) *the need for and the value of giving the learners some tangible reason for speaking* in the form of a *task* that they are working towards and therefore they need to speak in order to do so. 40 years ago, when she wrote her book *Discussions that work*, much of the language teaching scene needed to be woken up from the idea that simply giving the learners a topic to talk about will result in lively classroom discussion or conversation. As she rightly and aptly points out (1981:6): 'They would never, outside the classroom, dream of inventing sentences, merely for the sake of speaking. Such speech ... lacks the *purpose* of genuine discourse, and from this lack of purpose springs the lack of interest and motivation

No reason to talk

that too often leads to the ‘petering out’ phenomenon’ (i.e. that after a few words or sentences the learners feel they cannot think of anything to say). Since then, many coursebooks have taken up on this idea and contain task-based speaking activities.

Lack of time to think

Reason 5: Obviously, in real life speaking situations we often have to react immediately and have hardly any planning time to think over what we are going to say

and how. Therefore practising immediate reactions has a certain value in the language lesson. However, considering the fact that our students are still in the learning phase, and the topics that we throw at them do not arise out of their real life communication needs but are invented by us or the coursebook, *allowing them some quiet time to think* about their ideas and formulating them in English will increase the success of the speaking experience tremendously.

b) ‘I don’t know how to say it’

Reason 1: *Language deficiencies* very often get into the way of fluent communication. Many times learners would have ideas that they would be happy to express – but they lack the language forms to do so: the relevant vocabulary, the necessary functional expressions (like e.g. how to say no to an invitation politely) and the necessary grammar structures (e.g. it often happens that learners would like to say conditional sentences much earlier than these structures generally feature in the curriculum).

Language deficiencies

‘Perceived language deficiencies’

Reason 2: A very important variant of this problem is the phenomenon that we would call ‘*perceived language deficiencies*’. Some learners wish to express their ideas at the same level of

sophistication as they would be able to in their L1 – which is, of course, impossible, and people vary in terms of the degree of tolerance for this frustration. Especially highly educated people seem to be anxious about expressing themselves in what seems to them a very broken and simplistic formulation of their sophisticated ideas – they experience it as a kind of face-losing and prefer to remain silent instead. Allowing the students some time to formulate their ideas can be a great help here, too.

4. Supporting learners in speaking

The way the teacher plans and manages the speaking activities can greatly influence the learners' success in it. When planning speaking activities for your lessons, fortunately you do not need to reinvent the wheel – quality coursebooks nowadays contain tasks that were designed having most of the above considerations in mind. Let's now see how they work in practice.

Now open and do Task 3 in the attached folder before reading on. Please use the key to confirm your answers.



Summary

The focus of the present unit was the role of speaking in the foreign language learning process. We reviewed what the aims of speaking activities are, what makes them successful, what some typical learner problems are and how teachers can help overcoming them. While thinking about the tasks of this unit, you have hopefully developed a sensitivity to teaching speaking as a skill and by now you have a good understanding of how to design and implement speaking activities.

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