

PRODUCTIVE SKILLS | SPEAKING

INTRODUCTION

Speaking is one of the four language skills and, as it involves putting together words and sentences to express oneself, is a **productive skill**. Learners often consider speaking to be the most important language skill as language proficiency usually equates to the ability to take part in conversations fluently, without making mistakes and with good pronunciation.

Learners often complain that their **accuracy** and **fluency** is negatively affected by their lack of knowledge of grammar, their inability to retrieve words and expressions on the spot, their pauses and hesitations, their 'bad' pronunciation, and the general difficulty of understanding what their interlocutors say.

In fact, to achieve a good level of **speaking proficiency**, learners need to become competent at managing all these aspects and teachers should be aware that speaking lessons are not just opportunities to 'do some speaking', but proper lesson with instruction, practice and feedback on all these aspects.

The following is a brief summary of some basic components (i.e. **sub-skills**) of **speaking competence**.

- **GRAMMAR** (e.g. use of appropriate tenses, structures, etc.)
- **VOCABULARY** (e.g. use of appropriate words)
- **FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE** (e.g. use of 'chunks' to realize requests, offers, advice, descriptions, etc.)
- **PRONUNCIATION** (e.g. use of appropriate sounds, stress, intonation, etc.)
- **MANAGING INTERACTION** (e.g. ability to initiate/end conversations, offer turns, change topics, etc.)
- **COHERENCE & COHESION** (e.g. ability to present and link ideas logically, relate them to the context, etc.)
- **COMPENSATING DIFFICULTIES** (e.g. ability to paraphrase, use alternative words, buy 'thinking' time, etc.)
- **NEGOTIATING MEANING** (e.g. ability to ask for repetitions, check understanding, seek help, etc.)

This has **implications** for teaching as a purposeful speaking lessons should raise awareness of a **combination** of these aspects according to the specific **context** and **situation** in which an interaction may take place. This means that in a lesson in which learners role play a situation at a restaurant, for example, it wouldn't be sufficient to give some input on vocabulary related to food, but it would also be beneficial to provide input and feedback on functional language for requests and offers, ways to initiate and end a conversation, strategies to ask for repetitions and check understanding, etc.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES

Another important aspect of speaking competence is the difference between **accuracy** (i.e. the ability to produce grammatically accurate sentences) and **fluency** (i.e. the ability to produce continuous speech with intelligible grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation that does not cause interruptions or communication breakdowns).

Communication breakdowns are often prevented and repaired (and thus fluency is maintained) thanks to the use of **communication strategies**.

The following is a brief list.

- **Comprehension check** (i.e. rewording what is heard to confirm understanding)
- **Repetition** (i.e. repeating what is heard to confirm understanding)
- **Paraphrase** (i.e. paraphrasing something said to establish the meaning of a specific word)
- **Assistance appeal** (i.e. asking the listener for help with a difficult word)
- **Gesture** (i.e. using body language to establish the meaning of a specific word)
- **Clarification request** (i.e. asking the speaker to explain something again)
- **Approximation** (i.e. using an alternative word)
- **Confirmation check** (i.e. asking the listener whether they understood)

Teachers should try to strike an appropriate **balance** between accuracy and fluency, and should be aware that for many learners (especially at lower levels) communication strategies can have good **real-life value** as it can equip them with strategies to **negotiate** meaning and **compensate** for their lack of knowledge in a language.

Let's see an **example** of how a learner is able to maintain fluency in a conversation with her teacher despite lack of accuracy.

T	Hi Giulia, can I ask you a couple of questions for our school magazine?	
L	Sure!	
T	We are trying to find out what challenges our learners face when having a conversation in English. What's your biggest challenge?	
L	<u>You mean</u> challenge... <u>like</u> ... competition?	Comprehension check
T	What I mean is... What do you find difficult when speaking English?	
L	Oh, <u>difficult in speaking</u> . That's... er... I think... Vocabulary...	Repetition to confirm understanding
T	Why?	
L	Because... like... when I don't know the... er... word... er... <u>like the best word for something</u> ... <u>what do you call it?</u>	Paraphrase + Assistance appeal
T	The exact word?	
L	That's right... The exact word... er... I think it long time... and... make me slow! (smiling)	
T	I see... looking for the right word slows you down... (smiling)	
L	Yes, I'm not very... (<u>moving her hand from right to left to indicate something flowing</u>)	Gesture
T	...fluent?	
L	(nodding)	
T	And how do you cope with that?	
L	<u>What do you mean?</u>	Clarification request
T	I mean... what do you when you can't find the right word?	
L	I try to... er... like use a... er... <u>second word</u> ... <u>you know?</u> !	Approximation + Confirmation check
T	(nodding)	
L	... or say it again using more words... or give example... The teacher teach us that!	
T	Those are very good strategies, Giulia. I can see that you are already making very good progress! Make sure you get a copy of the magazine next week!	
L	Yes... yes... I like the magazine! See you later!	
T	See you later!	

For more information about the components of speaking competence and a more comprehensive list of speaking sub-skills and strategies, please refer to the following handout:

▪ Speaking sub-skills and strategies

SPEAKING TASKS

The design of a **purposeful** speaking task should follow certain principles. Giving learners some discussion questions or a role play to rehearse may not produce the desired outcomes.

The following are some useful **principles** to keep in mind when designing communicative activities.

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| ▪ AUTHENTIC | Does it reflect a real life situation? |
| ▪ FOCUSED on a SPECIFIC OUTCOME | Does it have a clear and specific objective? |
| ▪ GENERATIVE | Does it create the need to produce spoken language? |
| ▪ CHALLENGING | Does it provide a suitable level of intellectual and linguistic challenge? |
| ▪ INTERACTIVE | Does it actively involve speaker(s) and listener(s)? |
| ▪ SPONTANEOUS & UNPREDICTABLE | Does it include any communication problems, conflicts or unexpected events? |
| ▪ FLEXIBLE | Does it require a complex set up? Does it allow task repetition? |

For more information on speaking task types, please refer to the following handout:

▪ Communicative task types

PLANNING A SPEAKING LESSON

A speaking lesson can often be sequenced using popular lesson **frameworks** like Task-based Learning (TBL).

For more information on Task-based Learning (TBL) and how to plan a lesson using this framework, please refer to the following handouts:

- **Methodology | Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)**
- **Lesson Frameworks | TBL Speaking**

TEACHING TIPS

- Start the planning process of a speaking lesson by evaluating the material available, writing your aims and selecting a suitable communicative activity for the speaking performance stage.
- Include speaking sub-skills and communication strategies in your lesson aims. A useful speaking class is not just about getting the learners to speak. Equipping learners with communication strategies can add long-term value.
- Make sure speaking tasks:
 - a. have a clear COMMUNICATIVE OUTCOME;
 - b. place the emphasis on the OUTCOME (as opposed to the use of pre-selected language items);
 - c. are sufficiently GENERATIVE (create the need to produce language);
 - d. reflect the SPONTANEOUS and UNPREDICTABLE NATURE of LANGUAGE (include problems, conflicts and unexpected events);
 - e. are INTERACTIVE (as speaking generally involves a speaker and one or more listeners);
 - f. are AUTHENTIC and relate to REAL-LIFE SITUATIONS;
 - g. are sufficiently FLEXIBLE to allow the REPETITION of the task itself;
 - h. offer a suitable level of COGNITIVE and LINGUISTIC CHALLENGE.
- Provide some input before and/or after a task. Learners may notice useful vocabulary, expression, discourse features, communication strategies, etc.
- Enrich a communicative activity with some language-related feedback, but also give feedback on communicative effectiveness. Don't limit your feedback to accuracy and how to correct errors.
- Collect feedback on the learning experience: encourage learners to evaluate the lesson and reflect on personal successes and areas for improvement.
- Ask learners to record themselves while performing a speaking task and use the recordings for feedback and self-assessment purposes. Make sure all learners agree with it and feel comfortable recording themselves.

FURTHER READING

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