

USING SPEAKING ACTIVITIES IN THE EFL CLASSROOM: THEORY AND PRACTICE

DUHLICHER Olga, PhD, Associate Professor

Universitatea de Stat din Moldova, Facultatea de Litere,
Departamentul Limba Engleză și Limba Franceză Specializată

Dintre cele patru competențe lingvistice de bază, exprimarea orală este considerată cea mai importantă, deoarece comunicarea joacă un rol cheie în viața noastră de zi cu zi. În acest context, este important să menționăm că abilitățile de comunicare/exprimare orală sporesc fluența și acuratețea/corectitudinea limbajului studenților și, de asemenea, sporesc încrederea acestora. Aflarea modalităților de a ajuta studenții să practice activitățile de exprimare orală în clasă și să le facă distractive și interesante, dar utile este o provocare. Predarea activităților de exprimare orală în diferite grupuri de studenți în timpul orelor ne-a dat posibilitatea de a încerca diferite abordări și de a testa diferite tehnici. Există multe și variate activități de exprimare orală care îi ajută pe studenți să-și îmbunătățească abilitățile de comunicare și să-i ajute în dezvoltarea lor personală și profesională. Astfel, este necesar ca profesorii de limba engleză să implementeze diferite activități de exprimare orală în clasă. Articolul dat oferă sugestii legate de acest subiect, care pot inspira atât profesorii, cât și studenții. Devine esențial pentru profesori să ofere activități de exprimare orală eficiente pentru a stabili un mediu de învățare interactiv și pozitiv și pentru a-i face pe studenți să posede una din cele 4 competențe de bază.

Key words: teacher, learner, speaking skills, speaking activities, EFL, personal development

Among the four basic language skills, speaking is considered the most important as communication plays a key role in our daily life. In this regard, it is important to point out that speaking skills enhance the learners' language fluency and accuracy and they also boost the learners' confidence as well. Finding ways to help learners practice speaking activities in class and making it fun and interesting, but useful is a challenge. Teaching speaking activities in different groups of learners has given us the opportunity to try different approaches and test various techniques. There are many different speaking activities which help learners enhance their speaking skills and help them in their personal as well as professional development. Thus, the English

language teachers need to implement different speaking activities in the classroom in the process of teaching speaking skills. It becomes crucial for teachers to provide effective speaking activities in order to establish an interactive and positive learning environment and to make the learners proficient in their speaking skills.

According to L. Cora and P. Knight “Speaking is a crucial part of second/foreign language learning and teaching which involves producing, receiving and processing information”[3]. Furthermore, L. Cheng states that effective communication takes more than the ability to talk. It likewise includes the use of one’s mental capacities in the choice of words and the ability to make other person understand what one is saying and vice versa [2].

D. Achmad and Y.Q. Yusuf mention that in a speaking class, teachers are required to create communicative and interactive activities by giving students the opportunity to practice the target language. Mainly, the class has to demonstrate student-centred environment rather than teacher centred environment, while teachers have to prepare classroom activities that are devoted and best facilitate speaking activities. Teachers also carry the burden of knowing how learners from specific communities learn so that the teaching styles are uniform with the learners’ learning styles in order to enhance learning [1, 9].

Another important aspect that has to be mentioned is that the use of English for oral communication seems to be difficult for learners of English as a foreign language. S. Zhang affirms that for the majority of English learners, speaking is the most difficult skill to master. The problem is intensified as the language is only heard in the classroom and not practiced. The problem is also increased when there is no support for its use outside the classroom [12]. P. Ur assigns these difficulties to factors such as inhibition, nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and mother-tongue use [11]. G. Rababa’h (2005) connects the difficulties in speaking to the learners themselves, the teaching strategies, the curriculum, and the environment. In such a situation learners are deprived of the opportunity to speak in English [7].

At the same time, teaching speaking skills is quite a difficult task for the EFL teachers as it involves various other components that the learners have to acquire. Thus, the teachers have to implement innovative and a variety of speaking activities in the EFL classrooms and select the materials according to the needs and interests of the learners. Moreover, the teachers of English have to provide the positive and attractive atmosphere in the EFL classrooms in order to involve the learners more in speaking activities. With constant practice on speaking activities, there is no doubt that the learners will develop their speaking skills in English.

With reference to the reasons why it is a good idea to give students speaking tasks which challenge them to use all and any language at their command are mainly three as J. Harmer mentions: rehearsal, feedback and engagement. Firstly, speaking activities provide rehearsal opportunities; this means chances to practise real-life speaking in the safety classroom. Secondly, speaking tasks in which students try to use any or all of the languages they know provide feedback for both the teacher and the student. Everyone can see how well they are doing: both how successful they are and also what language problems they are experiencing. In addition, good speaking activities can and should be extremely engaging for the students. If they are all participating fully – and if the teacher has set up the activity properly and can then give sympathetic and useful feedback – they will get tremendous satisfaction from it.

And finally, the more students have the opportunities to activate the various elements of language they have stored in their brains, the more automatic their use of these elements become. This means that the students will be able to use words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thought [4].

As speaking skills are the most important skills for the learners to communicate effectively with the others, the English teachers have to point out more these skills in the EFL classrooms. When planning speaking activities it important to keep in mind that the content should be practical and usable in real-life situations and we need to avoid too much new vocabulary or grammar, and focus on speaking with the language the students have.

Since speaking skills need more time and practice to acquire, the teachers of English should teach speaking skills to the EFL learners in a systematic way. Furthermore, the learners should also pay more attention towards their teachers in order to grasp a variety of sentence structures and some new vocabulary that are needed for this purpose. In this regard, the EFL teachers have to adopt various techniques of teaching speaking skills such as to prepare their learners as active listeners and teaching various strategies of organizing their ideas. The EFL learners have to acquire the needed vocabulary as well as grammatical structures to communicate the English language effectively and successfully. In this regard, the teachers should select appropriate materials that involve the learners more in speaking activities.

J. Scrivener points out that for students to talk teachers need to fulfill one important requirement: to choose a relevant and interesting subject, otherwise they will not be motivated to talk about it. Furthermore, the topic needs to be known by the students to give them the chance to think and talk.

Additionally, J. Scrivener suggests mixing and group work as well as working with the class as a whole [8].

Here are some classroom activities for practicing speaking skills:

Vocabulary chain stories

In this speaking activity, students will be required to use a little more originality. The teacher has to pass around index cards with one vocabulary word on each card, have students for a circle, and explain that the teacher is going to tell a story. Keeping one card for himself/herself, the teacher will start the story with one sentence that contains his/her vocabulary word. The teacher can either go around the class or toss a bean bag to determine who goes next, but have each student add a sentence to the story that contains his/her vocabulary word. When all the cards have been used, the teacher can have students try to identify all of the vocabulary words in the story (no peeking at the index cards). This is a great way to review vocabulary words and encourage creative speaking [6].

Talking circles is another strategy to promote learners' speaking skills. Talking circles create safe environment through confidence where learners are given opportunities to share their points of view with their peers using the target language without fear of judgment or criticism. These activities are of immense use when the learners are feeling, sharing, considering moral or ethical issues. These activities are effective strategies for real life solving problems and reaching group consensus. Here the main concern of the teachers is to encourage the learners to share their views and opinions in talking circles [10].

Information Gap activities are speaking activities that takes place in the English language classroom. J. Harmer states that an information gap is where two speakers have different bits of information and they can only complete the whole picture by sharing that information because they have different information, there is a "gap" between them. There are other typical types of information gap activities including Describe and Draw, Spot/Find the difference, Jigsaw reading and listening and Split dictations. In *Describe and Draw*, the students have a picture which they must not show their partner. All the partner has to do is draw the picture without looking at the original, so the one with the picture will give instructions and descriptions, and the "artist" will ask questions. In *Find the differences*, in pairs, students each look at a picture which is very similar (though they do not know this) to the one the partner has. They have to find, say, ten differences between their pictures without showing their pictures to each other. This means they will have to do a lot of describing - and questioning and answering - to find the differences [4].

In fact, information gap activities are excellent activities, because they provide an opportunity for the learners to ask each other questions and give answers to the questions that are asked. Thus, these activities make the language classroom more meaningful and authentic.

For information gap activities to work, it is vitally important that students understand the details of the task (for example, that they should not show each other their pictures). It is often a good idea for teachers to demonstrate how an activity works by getting a student up to the front of the class and doing the activity (or a similar one) with that student, so that everyone can see exactly how it is meant to go [5].

Story in a bag

Preparing for the class, the teacher fills paper bags with five or six random objects. He/she will need one bag per group of four students. To make this activity interesting, the objects should be diverse and unrelated to each other. The teacher has to choose a combination of the unusual and the mundane. The objects chosen for the class could be a postcard, a can-opener, a candle, a surgical mask, a theatre playbill, a teddy bear. On a signal, each group of students opens their bag, removes the objects and invents an oral story incorporating all the objects found in the bag. The stories become very complex and creative in order to make each object a step in the plot. It's important that the story be oral and not written and then read. This allows spontaneous changes, and for group members to jump in and correct each other or add details in the final telling. When the groups have finished, each group shares its story with the whole class. Each student in the group should tell one part and hold up the related object when it's mentioned in the story. Some group members may tell two parts, or tell one part that uses two objects – it doesn't matter. Most of the speaking is done in the creation of the story within the group [13].

Surveys

One way of provoking conversation and opinion exchange is to get students to conduct questionnaires and surveys. If the students plan these questionnaires themselves, the activity becomes even more useful. The teacher chooses a topic and begins to talk about it (a story). He/she gets students to give him/her as much vocabulary about the topic as possible. Then, the students work in pairs to plan questions for their questionnaire on the chosen topic and the teacher goes round helping where necessary. The students go round the class questioning other students and noting down what they say. While they are doing this, the teacher listens and prompts where necessary. Encouraging students to get up and walk around talking to other classmates has many advantages as it provides a welcome variety of

interaction. Students can design and use surveys and questionnaires about any topic they are interested in [5].

Discussion wheels

Discussion wheels are a good way of giving students time to think and formulate opinions before they do discussion work. They work particularly well with areas of discussion which can have ranges of agreement or disagreement. In order to create a discussion wheel the teacher simply needs 8 or 10 contentious sentences based around a theme which he/she would like the students to discuss. The teacher draws a circle on a piece of paper and draw lines through the circle (one line for each sentence) so that the circle is divided into segments. At the end of each line, the teacher writes one of the sentences, and then makes sure to copy enough so that each student has one. Each student is given out their own discussion wheel and the teacher gets them to look at the sentences and put a cross on the line next to the sentence according to how much they agree or disagree with it. A cross near the center of the circle indicates strong disagreement and one near the edge of the circle can indicate strong agreement. A cross half way along the line can mean they are undecided. Once the students have had time to put crosses on each of the lines they can then start to discuss. This can be done in a number of ways. The easiest in terms of classroom management is for the teacher to give them a partner to discuss with (the person next to them or on the table in front of them). If the teacher has the space though, he/she can ask the students to connect all the crosses so that they form a shape and then stand up and mingle round the class to find the person in the class who has a similar shape to their own. Once they have a partner to talk to, the teacher asks them to discuss and explain their opinions and sees if they can convince their partner to change the position of the crosses. This approach gives the students more of a supportive framework and a goal for their discussion. If there is enough time and the students are doing well they can discuss with a number of partners, or the teacher can show them his/her own discussion wheel with the crosses and see if they can convince the teacher to move the crosses [13].

A Mock Trial

A mock trial has more to offer the students than familiarity with court procedures. Playing roles in a mock trial requires the students to speak clearly, logically and with conviction. They will need and develop confidence in their speaking abilities as they play formal roles in a mock court setting. Even if the students are not pre-law, give a mock trial a chance in your classroom and students' language abilities will flourish. Firstly, the teacher will show a video about the legal system in the USA or explain the details concerning the legal system. Secondly, the teacher will assign roles to the students. Then, the teacher will give the vocabulary for the different roles as

well as an explanation of what each person does during the trial. As the students understand the roles and know which they will be playing, the teacher has to review with them the steps in a trial. Before the actual mock trial, the teacher gives time to the students to prepare. The prosecution and the defence will be doing the most at this point. They will want to interview the witnesses and prepare their opening and closing statements. Keeping the topic of the trial light-hearted will keep the element of fun in an otherwise serious situation. If the teacher decides to give students the opportunity to participate in a mock trial, he/she will see the confidence that develops from public speaking and logical argument. Students will have experience in presenting as well as interviewing and deliberating, all valuable language skills [6].

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that speaking is the key to communication. Taking into account what good speakers do, what speaking tasks and activities can be used in the classroom and what specific needs learners demonstrate, teachers can help learners to improve their speaking skills and in general oral competency. As well, applying a wide range of speaking activities makes the lesson interactive, efficient and effective and learners participate in various activities very actively and enthusiastically. In order to teach speaking skills effectively, the teachers should go through the recent trends in the English language teaching and undergo training to acquire the latest techniques and approaches and introduce various activities in their classrooms in order to make the learners more proficient and skilful in their speaking skills.

REFERENCES:

1. ACHMAD, D., YUSUF, Y. Q. (2014) - Observing Pair-work in An English Speaking Class. *International Journal of Instruction*. January 2014, Vol.7 No. 1.
2. CHENG, L. (2007) - Targeting language support for non-native English speaking graduate students at a Canadian University. *TESL Canada Journal*,. 21(2), p. 50-71.
3. CORA, L., KNIGHT, P. (2000) - *Learning and teaching English: A course for teachers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
4. HARMER, J. (2007) - *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson Education Limited, 289p.
5. HARMER, J. (2001) – *How to teach English. An introduction to the practice of English language teaching*, Longman Press, 191p.
6. HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH LIKE A PRO. 40 top secrets every speaking teacher should know.

- <<https://www.pasco.k12.fl.us/library/esol/how-to-teach-speaking-like-a-pro.pdf>>
7. RABABA’H, G. (2005) - Communication problems facing Arab learners of English. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3(1), p 180-197.
 8. SCRIVENER J, (2005) - *Learning Teaching* (2nd ed.) - a guidebook for English language teachers, Oxford, Macmillan, 431 p.
 9. TALLEY, P.C., HUI-LING, T. (2014) - Implicit and Explicit Teaching of English Speaking in the EFL Classroom. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* Vol. 4, No 6; April 2014.
 10. TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS THROUGH VARIOUS TECHNIQUES AND ACTIVITIES
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/334283032_TEACHING_SPEAKING_SKILLS_IN_ENGLISH_LANGUAGE_CLASSROOMS_THROUGH_VARIOUS_TECHNIQUES_AND_ACTIVITIES>
 11. UR, P. (1996) - *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 388 p.
 12. ZHANG, S. (2009) - The role of input, interaction, and output in the development of oral fluency. *English Language Teaching*, 2(4), p. 91-100.
 13. DISCUSSION WHEELS
<<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/arm-exercises-speaking-activity-wake-a-sleepy-class>>