



TEACHING SPEAKING SKILLS - OVERCOMING CLASSROOM PROBLEMS

Turdibekova Iroda Oybek qizi
Andijan State University, Second-Year Student

Pazilova Nasibaxon Muhammadqosimovna
Andijan State University, Docent

Annotation

This article is written for teachers with large classes of students who have encountered some of the following or similar problems during speaking activities in their classroom.

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Speaking is “the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts”. Speaking is a crucial part of the second language learning and teaching. Despite its importance, for many years, teaching speaking has been undervalued and English language teachers have continued to teach speaking just as a repetition of drills or memorization of dialogues. However, today’s world requires that the goal of teaching speaking should improve students’ communicative skills, because, only in that way, students can express themselves and learn how to follow the social and cultural rules appropriate in each communicative circumstance. In order to teach second language learners how to speak in the best way possible, some speaking activities are provided below, that can be applied to ESL and EFL classroom setting, together with suggestions for teachers who teach oral language.

The teaching speaking is to teach ESL learners to produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns, to use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language, to select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting audience, situation and subject matter, to organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence, to use languages as a means of expressing values and judgment, to use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency.

Many students equate being able to speak a language as knowing the language and therefore view learning the language as learning how to speak the language, or as Nunan wrote, "success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a



conversation in the (target) language." Therefore, if students do not learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom they may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning. On the other hand, if the right activities are taught in the right way, speaking in class can be a lot of fun, raising general learner motivation and making the English language classroom a fun and dynamic place to be.

Just think of all the different conversations you have in one day and compare that with how much written communication you do in one day. Which do you do more of? In our daily lives most of us speak more than we write, yet many English teachers still spend the majority of class time on reading and writing practice almost ignoring speaking and listening skills. Do you think this is a good balance? If the goal of your language course is truly to enable your students to communicate in English, then speaking skills should be taught and practiced in the language classroom.

Dealing with common arguments against teaching speaking skills in the classroom. Students won't talk or say anything. One way to tackle this problem is to find the root of the problem and start from there. If the problem is cultural, that is in your culture it is unusual for students to talk out loud in class, or if students feel really shy about talking in front of other students then one way to go about breaking this cultural barrier is to create and establish your own classroom culture where speaking out loud in English is the norm.

Another way to get students motivated to speak more is to allocate a percentage of their final grade to speaking skills and let the students know they are being assessed continually on their speaking practice in class throughout the term.

A completely different reason for student silence may simply be that the class activities are boring or are pitched at the wrong level. Very often our interesting communicative speaking activities are not quite as interesting or as communicative as we think they are and all the students are really required to do is answer 'yes' or 'no' which they do quickly and then just sit in silence or worse talking noisily in their L1.

Another way to encourage your students to speak in English is simply to speak in English yourself as much as possible in class. If you are shy about speaking in English, how can you expect your students to overcome their fears about speaking English?

When students work in pairs or groups they just end up chatting in their own language. Is the activity or task pitched at the right level for the students? Make



sure you give the students all the tools and language they need to be able to complete the task. If the language is pitched too high they may revert to their L1, likewise if the task is too easy they may get bored and revert to their L1. Also, be aware of the fact that some students especially beginners, will often use their L1 as an emotional support at first, translating everything word for word to check they have understood the task before attempting to speak. In the case of these students simply be patient as most likely once their confidence grows in using English their dependence on using their L1 will begin to disappear.

When all the students speak together it gets too noisy and out of hand and I lose control of the classroom. First of all separate the two points a noisy classroom and an out-of-control classroom. A classroom full of students talking and interacting in English, even if it is noisy, is exactly what you want. Maybe you just feel like you are losing control because the class is suddenly student centered and not teacher centered. This is an important issue to consider. Learner-centered classrooms where learners do the talking in groups and learners have to take responsibility for using communicative resources to complete a task are shown to be more conducive to language learning than teacher-centered classes (Long & Richards 1987). Nevertheless, many classrooms all over the world continue to be teacher-centered, so the question you have to ask yourself is, how learner centered is my classroom?

Losing control of the classroom, on the other hand, is a different issue. Once again walking around and monitoring the students as they are working in groups can help, as you can naturally move over to the part of the classroom where the noise is coming from and calm the rogue students down and focus them back on the task without disrupting the rest of the students who are working well in their groups. If students really get too rowdy then simply change the pace of the class and type of activity to a more controlled task, for example a focus on form or writing task where students have to work in silence individually. Once the students have calmed down you can return to the original or another interactive group activity. These are just some of the problems that teachers with large classes face when teaching speaking activities in the classroom. These problems are not new nor are the solutions offered above. Teachers all over the world continue to face the same hurdles, but any teacher who has overcome these difficulties and now has a large class of energetic students talking and working in English in groups together will tell you it is worth all the trial and error and effort at the outset. If you believe in the importance of teaching speaking skills in the classroom but are having



difficulties making speaking activities work in your classroom why not contact your local teaching associations or branch of TESOL. Maybe they run workshops for teaching speaking skills, or maybe they can put you in contact with other teachers in similar situations but with more experience teaching speaking skills who will be willing to share their experiences with you.

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