

Teaching speaking: Activities to promote speaking in a second language

University of Nevada (Nevada, USA)

Introduction

Speaking is "the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, in a variety of contexts" (Chaney, 1998, p. 13). Speaking is a crucial part of 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 settings, together with suggestions for teachers who teach oral language.

What Is "Teaching Speaking"?

What is meant by "teaching speaking" is to teach ESL learners to:

Produce the English speech sounds and sound patterns

Use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the second language.

Select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter.

Organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence.

Use language as a means of expressing values and judgments.

Use the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses, which is called as fluency. (Nunan, 2003)

How To Teach Speaking

Now many linguistics and ESL teachers agree on that students learn to speak in the second language by "interacting". Communicative language teaching and collaborative learning serve best for this aim. Communicative language teaching is based on real-life situations that require communication. By using this method in ESL classes, students will have the opportunity of communicating with each other in the target language. In brief, ESL teachers should create a classroom environment where students have real-life communication, authentic activities, and meaningful tasks that promote oral language. This can occur when students collaborate in groups to achieve a goal or to complete a task.

Activities To Promote Speaking

Discussions

After a content-based lesson, a discussion can be held for various reasons. The students may aim to arrive at a conclusion, share ideas about an event, or find solutions in their discussion groups. Before the discussion, it is essential that the purpose of the discussion activity is set by the teacher. In this way, the discussion points are relevant to this purpose, so that students do not spend their time chatting with each other about irrelevant things. For example, students can become involved in agree/disagree discussions. In this type of discussions, the teacher can form groups of students, preferably 4 or 5 in each group, and provide controversial sentences like "people learn best when they read vs. people learn best when they travel". Then each group works on their topic for a given time period, and presents their opinions to the class. It is essential that the speaking should be equally divided among group members. At the end, the class decides on the winning group who defended the idea in the best way. This activity fosters critical thinking and quick decision making, and students learn how to express and justify themselves in polite ways while disagreeing with the others. For efficient group discussions, it is always better not to form large groups, because quiet students may avoid contributing in large groups. The group members can be either assigned by the teacher or the students may determine it by themselves, but groups should be rearranged in every discussion activity so that students can work with various people and learn to be open to different ideas. Lastly, in class or group discussions, whatever the aim is, the students should always be encouraged to ask questions, paraphrase ideas, express support, check for clarification, and so on.

Role Play

One other way of getting students to speak is role-playing. Students pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. Thus, the teacher can tell the student that "You are David, you go to the doctor and tell him what happened last night, and..." (Harmer, 1984)

Simulations

Simulations are very similar to role-plays but what makes simulations different than role plays is that they are more elaborate. In simulations, students can bring items to the class to create a realistic environment. For instance, if a student is acting as a singer, she brings a microphone to sing and so on. Role plays and simulations have many advantages. First, since they are entertaining, they motivate the students. Second, as Harmer (1984) suggests, they increase the self-confidence of hesitant students, because in role play and simulation activities, they will have a different role and do not have to speak for themselves, which means they do not have to take the same responsibility.

Information Gap

In this activity, students are supposed to be working in pairs. One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information. Information gap activities serve many purposes such as solving a problem or collecting information. Also, each partner plays an important role because the task cannot be completed if the partners do not provide the information the others need. These activities are effective because everybody has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

Brainstorming

On a given topic, students can produce ideas in a limited time. Depending on the context, either individual or group brainstorming is effective and

learners generate ideas quickly and freely. The good characteristics of brainstorming is that the students are not criticized for their ideas so students will be open to sharing new ideas.

Storytelling

Students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. Story telling fosters creative thinking. It also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending, including the characters and setting a story has to have. Students also can tell riddles or jokes. For instance, at the very beginning of each class session, the teacher may call a few students to tell short riddles or jokes as an opening. In this way, not only will the teacher address students' speaking ability, but also get the attention of the class.

Interviews

Students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people. It is a good idea that the teacher provides a rubric to students so that they know what type of questions they can ask or what path to follow, but students should prepare their own interview questions. Conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class. Moreover, students can interview each other and "introduce" his or her partner to the class.

Story Completion

This is a very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle. For this activity, a teacher starts to tell a story, but after a few sentences he or she stops narrating. Then, each student starts to narrate from the point where the previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on.

Reporting

Before coming to class, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they have experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class.

Playing Cards

In this game, students should form groups of four. Each suit will represent a topic. For instance:

Diamonds: Earning money

Hearts: Love and relationships

Spades: An unforgettable memory

Clubs: Best teacher

Each student in a group will choose a card. Then, each student will write 4-5 questions about that topic to ask the other people in the group. For example:

If the topic "Diamonds: Earning Money" is selected, here are some possible questions:

Is money important in your life? Why?

What is the easiest way of earning money?

What do you think about lottery? Etc.

However, the teacher should state at the very beginning of the activity that students are not allowed to prepare yes-no questions, because by saying yes or no students get little practice in spoken language production. Rather, students ask open-ended questions to each other so that they reply in complete sentences.

Picture Narrating

This activity is based on several sequential pictures. Students are asked to tell the story taking place in the sequential pictures by paying attention to the criteria provided by the teacher as a rubric. Rubrics can include the vocabulary or structures they need to use while narrating.

Picture Describing

Another way to make use of pictures in a speaking activity is to give students just one picture and having them describe what it is in the picture. For this activity students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. Students discuss the picture with their groups, then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class. This activity fosters the creativity and imagination of the learners as well as their public speaking skills.

Find the Difference

For this activity students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures, for example, picture of boys playing football and another picture of girls playing tennis. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures.

Suggestions For Teachers in Teaching Speaking

Here are some suggestions for English language teachers while teaching oral language:

Provide maximum opportunity to students to speak the target language by providing a rich environment that contains collaborative work, authentic materials and tasks, and shared knowledge.

Try to involve each student in every speaking activity; for this aim, practice different ways of student participation.

Reduce teacher speaking time in class while increasing student speaking time. Step back and observe students.

Indicate positive signs when commenting on a student's response.

Ask eliciting questions such as "What do you mean? How did you reach that conclusion?" in order to prompt students to speak more.

Provide written feedback like "Your presentation was really great. It was a good job. I really appreciated your efforts in preparing the materials and efficient use of your voice..."

Do not correct students' pronunciation mistakes very often while they are speaking. Correction should not distract student from his or her speech.

Involve speaking activities not only in class but also out of class; contact parents and other people who can help.

Circulate around classroom to ensure that students are on the right track and see whether they need your help while they work in groups or pairs.

Provide the vocabulary beforehand that students need in speaking activities.

Diagnose problems faced by students who have difficulty in expressing themselves in the target language and provide more opportunities to practice the spoken language.

Conclusion

Teaching speaking is a very important part of second language learning. The ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learner in school and success later in every phase of life. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired. With this aim, various speaking activities such as those listed above can contribute a great deal to students in developing basic interactive skills necessary for life. These activities make students more active in the learning process and at the same time make their learning more meaningful and fun for them.

References

Celce-Murcia, M. 2001. Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language (3rd ed). USA: Heinle&Heinle.

Chaney, A.L., and T.L. Burk. 1998. Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8. Boston: Allyn&Bacon.

Baruah, T.C. 1991. The English Teacher's Handbook. Delhi: Sterling Publishing House.

Brown, G. and G. Yule. 1983. Teaching the Spoken Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Harmer, J. 1984. The Practice of English Language Teaching. London: Longman.

McDonough, J. and C. Shaw. 2003. Materials and Methods in ELT: a teacher's guide. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell.

Nunan, D., 2003. Practical English Language Teaching. NY:McGraw-Hill.

Staab, C. 1992. Oral language for today's classroom. Markham, ON: Pippin Publishing.

MYSTERY QUEEN

Christie was probably the most successful writer in history. She wrote 78 crime novels, six other novels, 150 short stories, four non-fiction books and 19 plays. That represents two billion books sold: more than William Shakespeare!

Christie became a writer by accident. She was bored when her husband was away in the First World War. Agatha was working in a hospital dispensary (which is where she learned all the information about poisons that she used in her books). She decided to write a novel to pass the time. She chose a detective novel because she loved reading them. Her first novel, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, was an instant success. Each book had a new ingenious plot. Readers loved the books, particularly because Christie always gave the readers all the information they needed to find the solution.

Christie loved travelling. When she became rich she could go all over the world. She used the travels in her writing. Agatha Christie died in 1976, but her stories are still immensely popular. Many have been adapted for film or television.

A HUNDRED BILLION HAMBURGERS

Once upon a time, a businessman named Ray Kroc discovered a restaurant owned by two brothers. The restaurant served just four things: hamburgers, French fries, milk shakes and coca cola. But it was clean and inexpensive, and the service was quick. Mr Kroc liked it so much that he paid the brothers so that he could use their idea and their name: Mc Donald's.

Beef, big business and fast service were the ingredients when Mr Kroc opened his first Mc Donald's in 1955. Four years later, there were 100 of them. Kroc knew Americans liked success. So he put signs saying how many millions of Mc Donald's hamburgers people had bought. In just four years, the number was one hundred million. Now, there are more than 13,000 Mc Donald's restaurants from Dallas to Paris and from Moscow to Beijing.

Anyone who wants to open a Mc Donald's must first work in one for a week. Then, they do a nine-month training programme, in the restaurants and at "Mc Donald's University" in Chicago. There they learn the Mc Donald's philosophy: quality control, service, cleanliness and cheap prices. Mc Donald's has strict rules, Hamburgers must be served before they are ten minutes old, and French fries, seven.

Mc Donald's has never stopped looking for new methods to attract customers, from drive-in windows to birthday parties. Chicken, fish, salad and, in some places, pizza are now on the menu. Mc Donald's in Holland even sells a vegetarian burger.

Their international popularity shows they have found the recipe for success.

Activities to Promote Speaking. Discussions. After a content-based lesson or a part of it, a discussion can be held for various reasons. Second, they increase the self-confidence of hesitant students, because in role play and simulation activities, they will have a different role and do not have to speak for themselves, which means they do not have to take the same responsibility. Information Gap. In everyday communication, spoken exchanges usually take place because there is some sort of information gap between the participants. To sum up, teaching speaking is a very important part of language learning. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to it. Here are some classroom activities to promote your students' speaking skills during the lesson:

3. Story completion: You read or tell the beginning of an interesting story to the pupils. Teaching speaking is a very important part of second language learning. The ability to communicate in a second language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learner in school and success later in every phase of life. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment where meaningful communication takes place is desired.