

Speaking and Writing

“The man invented language to satisfy his need to complain.”

Lily Tomlin (1939 -)

Twenty-six Letters

*Twenty-six cards in half a pack;
Twenty-six weeks in half a year;
Twenty-six letters dressed in black
In all the words you ever will hear.*

*Think of the beautiful things you see
On mountains, riverside, meadow and tree.
How many their names are, but how small
The twenty-six letters that spell them all.*

James Reeves

Teaching Speaking

We have to accept that speaking seems to be the most important of all the four skills. Most foreign language learners are primarily interested in speaking. Speaking is the subject of most complaints later. E.g. “I have learned English for five years and I cannot speak at all!” Yet these people usually forget that they still can listen, or read or even write. Anyhow speaking is a “representative” skill and learners feel that it is what they really need when learning a foreign language. Do the teachers satisfy their needs?

Children start to speak at the age of two approximately. At the age of nine to eighteen months they produce one-word sentences. Two or more-word sentences lacking inflection and function words appear till the age of four. Thus learning to speak is a long lasting process even in the native language. When teaching the foreign language we cannot respect everything in the first stages of native language acquisition though teaching should be as close to real life as possible. The pace should be faster. Students are eager to speak from the very beginning. That’s why we may start with complete simple sentences and we enrich the process of teaching by learning individual sounds and single words.

Speaking is possibly the most demanding skill to teach. It’s difficult to choose, plan and organize activities with students who in their native language are able to express so much. They can talk about their emotions, they like to make fun, and they are able to talk about their expectations, intentions and reactions. Now they expect to do the same in English but their word power is limited. The teacher has to find the balance between the wish and the chance. Fortunately a good textbook might be of great help. The teacher also has to cope with the lack of time devoted to English speaking during the day. Most students have no other opportunity to speak English except for school. In an English lesson there are more than twenty students

in one group, which lowers the chance to speak. Careful organization and methods of teaching bring good recipes enlarging the chance to speak. In our daily life it is the dialogue which is used most frequently not the monologue therefore pair work should be used as often as possible. It brings learning close to real life. Group work can be offered for a change. The teacher shouldn't be afraid of noise and buzzing in the classroom. The value of the chance to speak is higher than a value of a silent disciplined class. The discomfort of the noise pays.

Presenting new material

Students cannot speak unless they have at least the smallest word power. They obviously need to be given language before they can start speaking themselves. At the initial stage students will probably imitate the language heard or read without using their own creativity and imagination.

Pictures and drawings are used as a suitable teaching aid when we present new vocabulary, new constructions.

Masks used by students may bring nice refreshment pretending some other people or animals have entered the classroom and they talk to each other.

There are many photocopiable materials helping the teacher to provoke the young learners to speak.

Oral fluency practice

The teaching aids mentioned above can successfully be used when we want the learners to practise speaking. A friendly atmosphere is very important at this stage. Students shouldn't be afraid of speaking; they shouldn't be worried about making mistakes and of unpleasant criticism. Some students might even be shy of the attention that their speech attracts.

To overcome the problems we may base the activity on easy language. We can involve pair-work or group work enabling shy students to be "hidden" in the noise. We may choose the topic carefully to stimulate interest. We can give some instructions and training in discussion skills in advance.

Oral testing

Testing speaking with learners is a very delicate task. It could easily discourage students to speak at all. On the other hand students want to be evaluated. They want to know how good (hardly ever how bad) they are at speaking and many of them even like to show off.

Firstly the teacher shouldn't forget to do his monitoring whenever students speak in pairs. This brings a great chance to encourage and praise.

Secondly individual mistakes shouldn't be corrected during speaking. Fluency must be placed over accuracy in natural speaking.

Teaching Writing

When we start teaching writing in English, learners can already write in their native language usually or they are in the process of learning to write. Before we started writing learners perceived English just with their eyes and ears. Now hands are added and via writing students may express their personalities. It might bring them a wonderful satisfaction if they have written something. On the other hand many learners take a long time to acquire the skill of writing which needs a lot of patience. And there's one more thing quite unpleasant, associated with writing at school either in the native or in English languages and it is correcting errors.

We should also mention the difference between pronunciation and spelling which is a source of mistakes. Students should be explained the difference generally to accept it. When teaching writing, the teacher can hardly ever use his/her usual tricks: miming, gestures, pictures, real objects etc. They reappear during training or testing.

The beginning of writing in English is often limited to copying. Thanks to the reading skill learners may copy words and sentences. When the teacher asks the students to do minor adjustments in words and sentences they switch to training writing. As soon as they try to write similar constructions, sentences and words, they try so called imitation in writing and there's just a small step to real writing. There is a special feeling about seeing your work in a written form.

Writing for reinforcement

During this period learners are focused on spelling and self-expression is ignored. learners may perceive writing as nothing more than an exercise in accuracy. Students write to reinforce something that they have just learned. We should let learners read aloud for themselves when copying the words. Copying practises the language concentration:

- 1 **Straight copying** – look at the word and write it down.
- 2 Write down the words that you can read in a wordchain.
- 3 Write down all the animals, pieces of furniture, fruits, drinks ... you can find in the text.
- 4 **Matching** – match pictures with the words which you process yourself.
- 5 Multiple choice – write down which offer belongs to the picture.
- 6 **Delayed copying** – try to remember the words you read, write the words after the teacher has covered them. This activity trains short term visual memory.

Writing for training

Writing for training presents patterns of linguistic forms and gives students the chance to use and manipulate them:

- 1 **Gap-filling** exercises – choose the word from the list and write it down into the gap
- 2 Substitute the pictures in the text for the right words
- 3 Put the words/sentences given in random order into the best order for an English sentence/paragraph.
- 4 Complete the sentence by adding a word.
- 5 **Dictation** – listen to an incomplete sentence. Write it down and complete it.

Writing for imitation

The teacher wants the students to become familiar with syntactic forms by following carefully chosen models. Learners will be concentrated on transformation as well as on the content:

- 1 Read a passage talking about an English boy. Write a similar passage about yourself/your friend.
- 2 Read a few sentences about a cat. Write a similar paragraph about your dog/pet.

Free writing activities

At the beginning teachers emphasized accuracy and patterns in writing. Now the purpose and audience are in the centre of our attention. The language is the student's own language. Learners may write in pencil and use a rubber at the beginning. Mistakes should be corrected during the process of writing. The teacher even doesn't have to correct all the mistakes. The result may be displayed on the notice-board even with some mistakes in it:

- 1 Write what you do in the morning/afternoon, what you did yesterday.

- 2 Word stars – a key word is given. Write all words associated with the key word.
- 3 Vocabulary charts – write all the words describing the picture.
- 4 Dialogues – fill in the speech bubbles.
- 5 Messages – write a note, a message, a postcard, an invitation, or a letter.

The teacher should help learners as much as possible with the pre-writing preparation, during writing and correcting the text. Ideally students should have a folder to keep all written work in. They can decorate the folder. When everything the student has written is kept in one folder, the teacher and the student himself/herself can easily see how much progress is being made.