

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

Lily Tomlin (1939 -)

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.