

IMPROVING SPEAKING SKILLS FOR ESL STUDENTS

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Abstract: English is the world's *lingua franca*, a common language that people with different native languages can use to communicate. The more fluent you are in English, the more interesting, exciting and insightful conversations you can have. What's great is you can improve English speaking skills without a classroom partner or stressful lessons. This article will take you beyond the foundational aspects to reach communicative competence.

Keywords: *lingua franca*, ESL learners, Build Fluency, Focus on Individual Needs, Provide High-Interest Engagement, Model, Allow Time.

According to Hedge (2000), second language learners interact and solve tasks when they develop their communicative skills; therefore, language students should learn conversational rules, openings and closings; they should know what linking words to use to pass from one situation to another one. They should learn how to pronounce and stress words according to the setting of the conversations. They should even learn when to interrupt because "studies of native speaker conversation have shown that if any of these skills are lacking or poorly performed, then communication can break down" (p. 262). To help ESL students improve their speaking skills and participation in the classroom, teachers and

schools could implement several strategies. Three particular strategies have to do with speaking: role play, storytelling, and information gap exercises. The other strategies deal with affection and social interaction. Some of these social strategies are teachers and students' support, teachers' teamwork, teaching styles, the inclusion of affective factors in the classrooms, and knowledge about the students' cultures. For the purpose of this article, I will examine only the communicative strategies and the in-class peer-tutor social strategy. In conclusion, as soon as students are used to working with role playing this activity becomes a dynamic method which involves a great number of students at the same time who move, talk, and interact spontaneously. They add that storytelling is fun for teachers and students; it is a motivational activity to enhance instruction and it is also an educational activity because "students who find difficulty recalling facts from a textbook easily remember the concepts that are contained within a story"(p. Liao suggests teachers should ask more information questions instead of merely Yes/No questions. For example, teachers should ask, "When do you usually go to the gym?" "How often do you go to the movies?" instead of "Do you go to the gym?" "Do you go to the movies?" According to Harper, Maheady, Mallette, and Karnes (1999), classwide peer tutoring programs "permit students to interact with other students whom they might otherwise avoid or ignore" (p. 46). They add that students who have been involved with CWPT programs have shown "greater gains in spelling, reading, and math more than what they showed during the teacher-led instruction" (p. 47). Rogovin (2001), concerned with students' participation, provides teachers with some guidelines they can use to make the classroom a more dynamic place. She explains that these are "classroom rituals for encouraging full and democratic participation." Some of the guidelines are "a) Let children talk in groups of two or three first before they talk in front of the whole class; b) model small group discussions; c) have students raise their hands rather than call out; d) call on children whether or not they raise their hands" (p. 6).

Everyone has something to say some time or another. ESL learners are no different. As a teacher of either online English or classroom ESL

instruction, it is important to make your students feel comfortable speaking. They may feel embarrassed about their inability to speak English fluently. Or perhaps they are just shy. As an instructor, you need to ask yourself how you are impacting the learning environment:

- Are the students afraid to make mistakes?
- Is your instruction on their level?
- Do you state clear instructions with examples?
- Do your lessons incorporate exciting material and ways to teach?
- Are your students motivated and interested to learn?

After you ask yourself these questions and alter your teaching based on honest self-evaluation, you can incorporate more ways to encourage your students to learn English.

1. Build Fluency

The most important thing to remember is that your students need to be speaking English as much as possible. The more they practice, the better they speak. The better they speak, the more confidence they will gain. And this cycle will continue to build fluency. Don't make the grammar lessons the focal point of your instruction. Don't do too much teacher talk and lengthy explanations. Choral responses where the students recite the same "response" -- whether it be a word, phrase, sentence or dialogue -- are an effective tool to build vocabulary skills that lead to comprehension. This method helps to build success for all learners. So get your students to talk, and keep them talking!

2. Focus on Individual Needs

With the current educational journals consumed with such topics as *Differentiated Education*, *Meeting the Needs of All Learners*, *Maximizing the Disconnect Between the Real World and the Classroom*, etc., it is important that you, too, focus on each student. Choose those skills that are the most important for him or her, and tailor your instruction accordingly. While Student A may be struggling with learning

the alphabet and initial sounds, Student B might be reading at a fourth-grade level. I'm sure you get the point. Challenge all of your students with material at their own level to ensure language progress. My own teaching mantra is, "All learners can learn if we but know how to teach them." The onus is on you as a teacher. That is the unique skill you have to offer.

3. Provide High-Interest Engagement

We all learn more when we are engaged. Think of times when learning was the most enjoyable for you. Try to emulate those teaching styles. Was it how the teacher interacted with the class and how you were treated with respect, fairness, patience and acceptance? Maybe the teacher planned lessons that involved more than just passive learning. Perhaps there were learning activities with movement, which allowed for maintaining the students' attention levels and increasing their classroom participation. Did you have a creative teacher who used a variety of materials like flashcards, games, magazine and newspaper articles, pictures, photos, fieldtrips, projects, technology, role plays, guest speakers, simulations or question-and-answer sessions? Did they mix it up when it came to working individually and in small groups or whole-class instruction? Did they allow choice in student learning and ask for input as far as needs and interests?

4. Model

How you talk in your lessons, when both focusing on instruction and relating with your students, will increase their language ability. Speak slowly and clearly so that the ESL student will understand. Choose words that are easier for them to grasp. Use visuals whenever possible so that students can also read the directions at the same time. Teaching with two or more modalities heightens understanding and learning. Offer repetition and review until your students have mastery. Always be positive toward them, and continue to praise them for speaking to

encourage more speaking. Develop a strong, open and caring relationship toward each of your students, and in turn they will strive to be the best students possible. I guarantee you will have a more successful classroom of ESL students.

5. Allow Time

Learning a language is developmental. There are endless factors in acquiring a language, so it is important that you put this in perspective. When you talk to a student, allow wait time for the response. When they struggle with a certain skill or concept, help them over this hurdle. Everyone learns in different ways, and once you embrace this idea, you and your students will be more apt to enjoy the learning process together.

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