

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPEAKING SKILLS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Annotation: We know that speaking is of particular importance when learning any foreign language. This article talks about the importance of speaking skills in English class. 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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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 (1991) 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.

Speaking is fundamental to human communication

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 practised in the language classroom.

Dealing with common arguments against teaching speaking skills in the classroom. 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. One way to do this is to distinguish your classroom from other classrooms in your school by arranging the classroom desks differently, in groups instead of lines etc. or by decorating the walls in English language and culture posters. From day one teach your students classroom language and keep on teaching it and encourage your students to ask for things and to ask questions in English. Giving positive feedback also helps to encourage and relax shy students to speak more. 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.

Are all the students actively involved and is the activity interesting? If students do not have something to say or do, or don't feel the need to speak, you can be sure it won't be long before they are chatting away in their L1.

Was the timing of the activity good? The timing of a speaking activity in a class can be crucial sometimes. How many teachers have discovered that their speaking activity ended up as a continuation of the students break-time gossip conducted in the L1? After break-time, why not try giving students an activity to calm them down and make them focus before attempting speaking activities that involve groups or pair work. Another way to discourage students speaking in their L1 is to walk around the classroom monitoring their participation and giving support and help to students as they need it. If certain students persist in speaking in the L1 then perhaps you should ask them to stay behind after class and speak to them individually and explain to them the importance of speaking English and ask them why they don't feel comfortable speaking in English in the class. Maybe they just need some extra reassurance or they don't like working with certain students or there is some other problem that you can help them to resolve. 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 centred and not teacher centred. This is an important issue to consider. Learner-centred 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-centred classes (Long & Richards 1987). Nevertheless, many classrooms all over the world continue to be teacher centred, so the question you have to ask yourself is, how learner centred 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.

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. So maybe you need to take a closer look at the type of speaking activities you are using and see if they really capture student interest and create a real need for communication.

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? Don't worry if you are not completely fluent or don't have that elusive perfect native accent, as Swain (1985) wrote "We learn to speak by speaking" and that goes for teachers as well as students. The more you practise the more you will improve your own oral skills as well as help your students improve theirs.

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.

Conclusion

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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