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Teaching Speaking Sub-skills

Activities for Improving Speaking

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Methods and activities for more effective teaching with less preparation

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Introduction

Rather than just have students 'speak' in the classroom we should be teaching students specific speaking skills, known as sub-skills or micro skills. Since conversations outside the class are bound to be better learning experiences than those inside the class, rather than trying to duplicate real-world conversations in the classroom, we should be teaching students skills they are not likely to learn outside the classroom. By raising awareness of speaking sub-skills and providing classroom practice with them, we will be providing students with strategies to improve their communication outside the classroom, which is, or should be, the ultimate goal.

Essentials for Language Learning

EXPOSURE to a rich but comprehensible input of real spoken and written language in use

USE of the language to do things

MOTIVATION to listen to and read the language and to speak and write it

Jane Willis

Classroom vs. Real-world Speaking

| | Classroom Use | Real World Use |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Exposure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • non-native • artificial • Teacher chooses content • limited | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • native • authentic • Student chooses content • unlimited |
| Use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • artificial • determined by Teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • authentic • determined by Student |
| Motivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited rewards • rewarded by Teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • unlimited rewards • rewarded by inter-personal or transactional success |

Two Warmers

Barry's Activity

A tell B about a holiday in excruciating detail.

B show interest by using devices like:
 showing eye contact
 nodding your head
 saying, "Is that so?"
 saying, "Really?"
 saying, "Uh-huh"

Last Weekend

Answer these questions about last weekend:

- Did you have a good weekend?
- What was the best thing about your weekend?
- What was the worst thing about your weekend?

Contrary to popular belief, **Last Weekend**, as it is, has little value as a classroom speaking activity as it does not have students practice any sub-skills. It is not even set up to focus on fluency as the questions can be answered with one word. On the other hand, **Barry's Activity** encourages *Fluency*, *Turn-taking skills* and *Responding and Initiating*.

Turn-Taking Skills

Escalating Topics

| | | | | |
|--|-------------------|------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|
| | <i>Speaking</i> | <i>Listening</i> | <i>Reading</i> | <i>Writing</i> |
| | <i>Vocabulary</i> | <i>Grammar</i> | <i>Pronunciation</i> | <i>Warmer/Icebreaker</i> |

Do a whole class brainstorm of conversation topics and then get the class to determine the easiest and most difficult to talk about. One way to do this is to have a list of ten (or five) and then have groups of students rate them from one to ten (or five) in terms of difficulty (1 = easiest). Then draw a column for each group in your class next to the list on the board. After each group has determined the order of difficulty, one student comes to the board and writes the rank of each topic in one of the columns. When all groups have their rankings on the board, total the numbers for each topic and then compile the rankings, with the lowest score being for the easiest.

Get some examples of hesitation devices on the board and go over them making sure students know how to use them. Here are some commonly used ones:

- er...
- um...
- mm...
- let me see
- I mean
- you know
- you know what I mean
- the thing is
- sort of
- kind of
- you see
- what was it?

Then put students into pairs. When you give the signal one student in each pair is to start off and talk about the easiest topic on the list for a predetermined length of time (one to two minutes) and the listening students is to notice and count how many hesitation devices their partner uses (they can take notes). When the time is up, get the listener to indicate to the speaker how many were used and which ones they were. Then students switch roles and repeat the task. Then go on to the next topic on the list. The number of hesitation devices should increase as the topics get more difficult.

Waiting to Interject

| | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|------------------|--|----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| | <i>Speaking</i> | <i>Listening</i> | | <i>Reading</i> | | <i>Writing</i> |
| | <i>Vocabulary</i> | <i>Grammar</i> | | <i>Pronunciation</i> | | <i>Warmer/Icebreaker</i> |

Put students in groups of three to five and tell them they are going to have a conversation. Tell them that one person in each group will not participate but will serve as a judge to determine how well. In pairs students have a conversation. You can specify the topic you want students to talk about or you can let them choose their own topics. When they are ready, one student will start to speak and the other waits to interject. The speaker should decide when they want others to interject and indicate it by using a slight pause. If the listener interjects at the correct time, the speaker shakes their head to indicate “Yes”. If it was not at the time the speaker intended, he/she shakes their head to indicate “No”. If the listener interjected successfully, the judge awards him/her a point, and he/she then becomes the speaker. If the interjection was not done properly, the judge can indicate with a gesture (like pointing) for the speaker to continue.

Depending on your students level of fluency, you may want get them to practice hesitation devices before doing this activity so that they can make sure they don't inadvertently give up their turn.

- er...
- um...
- mm...
- let me see
- I mean
- you know
- you know what I mean
- the thing is
- sort of
- kind of
- you see
- what was it?

Group Conversation with Cards

| | | | | | | |
|--|-------------------|------------------|--|----------------------|--|--------------------------|
| | <i>Speaking</i> | <i>Listening</i> | | <i>Reading</i> | | <i>Writing</i> |
| | <i>Vocabulary</i> | <i>Grammar</i> | | <i>Pronunciation</i> | | <i>Warmer/Icebreaker</i> |

Go over some turn-taking skills with students (see Appendix for complete list). Have the skills you want your students to practice on cards (e.g., interrupting, holding a turn, yielding a turn, etc.) with a set of cards for each group of students. Put students in groups of three to five. Give each student in the group a different turn-taking strategy on a card. They can look at the cards but not show them to any other students. Either specify a speaking topic or have students choose their own. Set a time limit for their conversation and tell students they should use the turn-taking strategy on their card more than once. Stop the activity and the group tries to guess which strategy each participant had. Then they switch cards and play again.