

Do you sometimes have trouble getting your students to speak? Are they sometimes reluctant just to have a go at speaking? This lesson will help you to understand how you can use different types of speaking activities to get your students talking. It will also give you an indication of a good way to set up these activities.

Task 1 – Jim’s confusion

Jim: Sometimes I get students to do a role play because I want them to practise a particular grammar point. Other times I get them to do a role play because I want them to act out a situation they have just read about in a newspaper article. I know my overall aim is to get students to speak, but I’m sometimes not sure if I should also be doing some kind of grammar practice as well. The question is this: is it OK to do the kind of role play where students are just acting out a situation? And if it is OK, why is it OK?



What advice would you give Jim?

Jot down your advice on a note pad, then check the answer key below. 

Task 1 Feedback

Jim is right. The two kinds of role play are slightly different. In the first situation, the aim is to give students freer oral practice of a grammar point. However, in the second situation, there may not be a grammar practice aim at all. However, it is useful for students to have this kind of practice with the aim of developing students’ spoken fluency”. The rest of this lesson will look at ways of developing spoken fluency practice.

Key Skill

Students often lack the confidence to just speak and not worry about making mistakes. Spending time in the classroom helping them to develop some degree of oral fluency can go some way towards giving them confidence to speak freely and not be overly concerned with accuracy.

Task 2 – Different kinds of speaking activities



Below is a list of different kinds of speaking activities (1 - 8). Match these to the descriptions of the activities (a – h).

Speaking activities	
1. discussion	2. questionnaire
3. ranking activity	4. jigsaw activity
5. role-play	6. simulation
7. communication game	8. problem solving activity

Descriptions

- a. Students read brief restaurant reviews then discuss an order for a list of restaurants from the best to worst.
- b. Students are given a logic puzzle and talk about possible answers in pairs or small groups.
- c. In groups students pretend they are having a city council meeting to decide if some trees in the main street should be cut down or not. Each student has a different role to play, but they use their own names.
- d. In small groups, students put forward their ideas about global warming and what should be done about it.
- e. Students work in pairs, each with a picture. Both pictures are very similar, but there are some small differences. Without showing each other their pictures, they describe their pictures in order to spot the differences.
- f. Students move around the class asking each other about their last holiday destination as well as their ideal holiday destination.
- g. Different students read different information about a murder mystery. They form a group and share their information in order to try and solve the mystery.
- h. In pairs, students pretend to be neighbours. One neighbour thinks his partner a bit too noisy

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

There is a great variety of activities available to get students speaking. Some of the activities above can belong to more than one category. For example, **g** the jigsaw activity can also be seen as a problem solving activity. A key component of successful speaking activities is an information gap where one speaker knows something that the other speaker doesn't and there is a real reason to communicate.

Task 3 – A typical speaking lesson



Below are some steps in a typical lesson that aims to develop spoken fluency. Put these steps in the most logical order.

Typical lessons	Order
a. The teacher elicits or gives feedback either on the content or the performance of the speaking activity.	
b. The students spend some time planning the content of the speaking activity.	
c. The teacher introduces the speaking activity and perhaps provides some information input that will help students carry out the activity.	
d. The teacher gives feedback on the language that students used in the activity and might highlight and correct mistakes that learners made during the activity.	
e. The teacher gives instructions for the activity. This might mean that the students read some instructions or perhaps role cards.	
f. The students do the speaking activity and the teacher monitors and listens in on their progress.	

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Key Skill

Speaking lessons like any other lesson need careful setting up. If you hand out role cards for a role play and expect students to start speaking immediately, you will probably be disappointed. Students need to understand the context, the instructions on the role card and have a little time to think about what they want to say and how they are going to say it.

The order of the final 2 steps could be reversed. However, it pays to focus on content before rushing to do error correction, which could send a slightly negative message to students.

Task 4 – Managing speaking activities



Decide if the following ideas for speaking activities are “useful or “not so useful”. Jot down why you think so.

Ideas for managing speaking activities	
1. It pays to give students some thinking time before they speak.	
<i>Useful</i>	<i>Not so useful</i>
2. It’s useful to do as much error correction as possible while students are talking.	
<i>Useful</i>	<i>Not so useful</i>
3. You need to think carefully about grouping and pairing students for speaking activities.	
<i>Useful</i>	<i>Not so useful</i>
4. It doesn’t really matter what topic you choose for speaking activities. Students can talk about anything.	
<i>Useful</i>	<i>Not so useful</i>
5. It’s a good idea to encourage students to think about their speaking speed to make them sound more fluent.	
<i>Useful</i>	<i>Not so useful</i>
6. It is sometimes helpful to base a speaking lesson on a reading or a listening lesson.	
<i>Useful</i>	<i>Not so useful</i>

Check your ideas in the answer key. 

Thinking about your teaching ...

Over a period of time, monitor and record your students' reactions to different speaking activities. Decide how motivated they were to speak and how quickly they began speaking once you had set the activity up. Finally, evaluate how much language the activity generates. Did students speak for a long or a short amount of time? If you feel the speaking lesson was not successful, try to work out why this was the case, using the "useful" and "not very useful" ideas in task 4.

Note your observations in your *Teaching log*.

Taking it to the classroom ...

To help you plan speaking lessons that your learners enjoy, try doing some evaluation of each speaking activity you do once it is over. Ask students what they feel they got out of the activity and how much it motivated them. Perhaps get them to discuss these ideas in small groups then give your own feedback. It will also give them further speaking fluency practice.

Want to find out more ... ?

On pages 146 - 163 of *Learning Teaching (2nd edition)* by Jim Scrivener (Macmillan 2005), there is further reading on spoken fluency practice, including teaching ideas.

On pages 343 - 363 of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (4th edition)* by Jeremy Harmer (Pearson 2007), there is further reading on spoken fluency practice, including classroom speaking activities and speaking lesson sequences.

Related TaskBook lessons...

You may be interested in the following lessons in the ESOL Teaching Skills TaskBook series, relating to this topic:

- **Unit 3 f) Speaking strategies:** *Discusses useful skills and strategies associated with successful oral communication.*
- **Unit 5 g) Using drama activities:** *Discusses how adding an element of drama to activities may help motivate students to speak in English.*

Answer Key



Task 2 – Feedback

1. **d** (discussion)
2. **f** (questionnaire)
3. **a** (ranking activity)
4. **g** (jigsaw activity)
5. **h** (role play)
6. **c** (simulation)
7. **e** (communication game)
8. **b** (problem solving activity)

Task 3 – Feedback

1. **c**
2. **e**
3. **b**
4. **f**
5. **a**
6. **d**

Task 4 – Feedback

1. **Useful** - *students need time to organise not only their ideas, but also their language.*
2. **Not so useful** - *this might interrupt the flow of speech or inhibit students in some way, particularly at lower levels when learners tend to have less confidence.*
3. **Useful** - *putting students together who have very different abilities or who do not get on can mean that students will be reluctant to speak.*
4. **Not so useful** - *if a topic is not familiar or interesting to learners, they won't want to speak about it. You need to think carefully about learners' interests and needs.*
5. **Not so useful** as *this might put unnecessary pressure on them and inhibit their speaking. Fluency and speed is not the same thing.*
6. **Useful** - *the content of a reading or listening text will give learners something to talk about and may provide useful background information for the speaking.*