

Concepts for Teaching Speaking in the English Language Classroom¹

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Abstract

Systematically and explicitly addressing the teaching of speaking is an aspect of English language teaching that is often underestimated. While teachers may be presenting various speaking activities in the classroom, such activities may amount to ‘doing speaking’ rather than ‘teaching speaking’. In this article, I argue that being a competent teacher of speaking involves understanding the ‘combinatorial’ nature of speaking, which includes the linguistic and discursal features of speech, the core speaking skills that enable speakers to process and produce speech, and the communication strategies for managing and maintaining spoken interactions. The article concludes by presenting a ‘teaching-speaking cycle’ (Goh and Burns, 2012) that teachers can use to plan tasks and activities that explicitly address these aspects of speaking and that scaffold student learning.

Keywords: Teaching Speaking, Second Language Speaking Competence, English Language Classroom

Introduction

The teaching and learning of speaking are a vital part of any language education classroom; not only does the spoken language offer ‘affordances’ for learning as the main communicative medium of the classroom, but it is also an important component of syllabus content and learning outcomes. However, teaching speaking remains challenging for many English teachers. A key issue here is whether what happens in a speaking classroom is concerned with ‘doing’ teaching or ‘teaching’ speaking. In this paper, I consider some of the essential elements that comprise speaking competence and present a teaching-speaking cycle designed to address the teaching of speaking systematically. The paper finishes with a brief analysis of the key aspects of the teaching-speaking cycle identifying how it covers areas that are central to planning a holistic and sequenced approach to the teaching of speaking.

Doing Teaching or Teaching Speaking?

Comments such as the following are familiar to many teachers working in classrooms which aim to develop speaking skills:

All my students can read and write well, but they are poor at speaking and listening.
Many of my students are too afraid to talk in class. They are shy and lack confidence.
Some of my students sound very “bookish” when they speak – it’s as if they are reading from a book!
My students love to speak, but they make a lot of grammatical mistakes.

¹ Much of the material in this paper is drawn from a recent publication, Goh, C.C.M. & Burns, A. (2012). *Teaching speaking: A holistic approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press. I gratefully acknowledge my co-author Christine Goh for the formulation of many of the ideas presented.

These kinds of observations are not uncommon, as learning to speak in another language is a challenging undertaking. Speaking is a highly complex and dynamic skill that involves the use of several simultaneous processes - cognitive, physical and socio-cultural - and a speaker's knowledge and skills have to be activated rapidly in real-time. It is important, therefore, that speaking should be taught explicitly in language classrooms – simply “doing” speaking through a series of activities is not the same as learning the knowledge, skills and strategies of speaking. By way of illustration, we will consider the following classroom situation:

Teacher M realised from early in her career that it was important to develop her students' speaking abilities. She wanted to make sure that her students had plenty of opportunities to communicate with one another in English, so she set aside two lessons a week for speaking practice. She planned many interesting activities for her students. Her lessons were carefully guided by instructional objectives. These objectives were in the form of either what the students should produce (e.g. presentations, debates, descriptions) or what they had to do (e.g. discuss, narrate, role play). Sometimes when they had finished the activities, Teacher M would ask them to present the outcomes to the rest of the class. At other times she would simply move on to another activity, such as reading or writing.

In several ways, Teacher M was successful in constructing her speaking lessons. However, there were also limitations regarding how directly she was addressing the students' needs to improve their speaking. On the positive side, she presented a variety of activities, which could appeal to her students' different learning styles. Clearly, her students enjoyed interacting during the lesson and the activities gave them opportunities to practise speaking. They also had some opportunities to present the outcomes of the activities. Less positively, however, the lessons provided little preparation for practising specific speaking skills, and they lacked any explicit teaching of key features of speaking. The students were not encouraged to give attention to knowledge, skills, or strategy development. Also, there was little feedback on their performance, and minimal or no follow-up to the activities.

What Must a Competent Speaker Be Able to Do?

To teach speaking holistically and comprehensively, it is valuable for teachers to be knowledgeable about what speaking competence involves and how different aspects of speaking competence relate to each other. Johnson (1996, p. 155) describes speaking as a “combinatorial skill” that “involves doing various things at the same time”. Figure 1 below presents a model of second language speaking competence that comprises knowledge of language and discourse, core speaking skills, and communication and discourse strategies. Learning to speak in a second language involves increasing the ability to use these components in order to produce spoken language in a fluent, accurate and socially appropriate way, within the constraints of a speaker's cognitive processing.

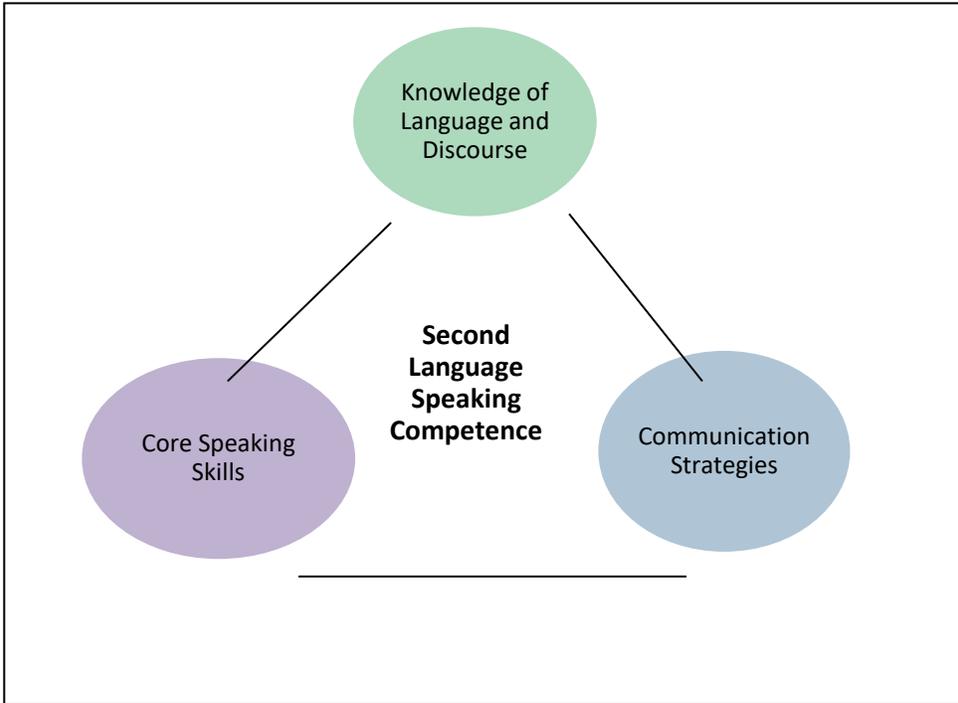


Figure 1: Components of second language speaking competence (Goh and Burns, 2012, p. 53)

The first component, *Knowledge of Language and Discourse*, requires mastering the sound patterns of the language (in English, this means being able to pronounce the language intelligibly at segmental and suprasegmental levels), knowing the grammar and vocabulary of the language (spoken structures, grammatical features, lexis) and understanding how stretches of connected speech (discourse, genre) are organised, so that they are socially and pragmatically appropriate (register). *Core Speaking Skills* refers to developing the ability to process speech quickly to increase fluency (e.g. speech rate, chunking, pausing, formulaic language, discourse markers). It also involves being able to negotiate speech (e.g. building on previous utterances, monitoring understanding, repairing communication breakdown, giving feedback), as well as managing the flow of speech as it unfolds (e.g., initiating topics, turn-taking, signalling intentions, opening/closing conversations). The third component, *Communication Strategies*, involves developing cognitive strategies to compensate for limitations in language knowledge (e.g. circumlocution, paraphrasing, gestures, word coinage, approximation, avoidance), metacognitive strategies (e.g. planning in advance what to say, thinking consciously about how you say something), and interaction strategies (e.g. asking for clarification/repetition, reformulating, rephrasing, and checking comprehension).

What this model implies is that speaking lessons are not just occasions for simply practising or “doing” speaking. They need to be conceptualised as structured and supported learning opportunities that develop these various components of speaking competence. It is important that teachers guide learners systematically, introducing activities that are integrated and sequenced and that allow them to raise their awareness of the knowledge, skills and strategies needed for different types of interaction and discourse. Students may need guidance on specific aspects of the language, such as pronunciation features, either at segmental or

suprasegmental level, or they may need support in relation to affective factors, such as anxiety, nervousness or embarrassment about speaking in another language.

Comparing spoken and written language

Many approaches typically used in language teaching to teach speaking have taken little account of the features of spoken language, and have tended instead to fall back on grammars that are essentially based on written text. Technological advances in recording speech and the establishment by linguists of corpora of speech utterances have led to much greater knowledge about the similarities and differences between these two modes of communication. It is very valuable for language teachers to be aware of some of the main differences and of the features that typically characterise speech, as this will allow them to make more informed decisions about what to teach.

McCarthy (1998, p. 79-80) makes the point that:

Anyone who has looked at large amounts of informal spoken data, for example, cannot fail to be struck by the absence of well-formed 'sentences' with main and subordinate clauses. Instead we often find turns that are just phrases, incomplete clauses, clauses that look like subordinate clauses but which seem not to be attached to any main clause, etc.

Although spoken and written language are clearly related, typically they serve different social purposes and have different audiences. Speakers and writers draw on common linguistic resources, but they utilise them in different ways. As Halliday (1985, p. 45) notes, "... the kinds of meanings that are transmitted in writing tend to be somewhat different from the kinds of meanings transmitted through speech". By way of illustration, compare the following texts, that deal with the same content and meanings. The speaker in Text 1 is describing the experience of studying in a Master's course offered as a distance learning program.

Text 1

I was working in Turkey at the time... um I was lucky enough to have one of my colleagues doing the same program... started at the same time as me so we used to get together regularly...er sometimes as often as twice a week and would get together and compare our findings and...er because our learning styles were different as well, we, well, compensated for one another other... .

Text 2 illustrates how this information might be expressed in a written version.

Text 2

I was then employed in Turkey where, fortunately I was able to collaborate with a colleague who commenced the program simultaneously. We held regular weekly meetings to compare findings. Because our learning styles were different, we complemented each other.

There are some noticeable differences in the way the meanings are 'packaged' in these two texts. Speech is constructed spontaneously and therefore shows particular patternings of language use that are not usually found in written texts. Table 1 below summarises some of the key differences between the spoken and written language. It is important to note that these differences broadly *typify* these differences; speech and writing may be more or less typically spoken-like or written-like depending on the sociocultural context, the topic, the relationships

between speaker/writer and listener/reader and the distance in time and space from the phenomena, events or actions which are the focus of meaning.

Table 1. Spoken and written language: Typical features

Spoken language	Written language
Basic unit is the clause (utterance)	Basic unit is the sentence
Clauses linked by conjunction (<i>and, but, so</i> etc) to build the text	Clauses linked by subordination (<i>who, which, when</i> etc) to build the text
Frequent use of formulaic chunks (<i>I was lucky enough</i>)	Little use of formulaic language
Informal language preferred (<i>we used to get together</i>)	Formal language preferred (<i>commenced</i>)
Range of noticeable performance effects (hesitations, pauses, repeats, false starts, incompleteness)	Few/no noticeable performance effects
Frequent use of ellipsis (omission of grammatical elements, <i>started at the same time</i>)	Little use of ellipsis
Frequent use of personal pronouns (<i>I, we</i>)	Little use of personal pronouns

Social and functional motivation

Another useful insight for language teachers who teach speaking relates to social and functional motivation for speaking. The distinction has long been made between interpersonally motivated speech and pragmatically motivated speech (Brown and Yule, 1983). Pragmatic or transactional talk involves exchanging information or goods and services (e.g. seeking information about a job, calling an ambulance) with the purpose of getting things done in daily life. Interactional or interpersonal talk, on the other hand, is primarily directed towards creating and maintaining social relationships (e.g. chatting with friends or family, making small talk).

These distinctions are useful because they enable teachers to identify which major kinds of interactions are important for their students. However, in practice, most spoken interactions are a mixture of both social and functional motivation: it would be surprising for business meetings, for example, not to involve elements of interpersonal talk, even though the main purpose is primarily transactional. However, these elements would be constrained by the speakers' awareness of the main purpose of needing to get the business done and the typical more formalised roles and relationships among the speakers. Similarly, a casual conversation between friends, which is mainly interactional, might contain episodes where the purpose is transactional, such as asking for information about a technical matter or negotiating a price for goods being exchanged. Spoken language tends to foreground interpersonal relationships in a way that is usually less common in written texts, so that the nature of the relationships between speakers inevitably has an impact on the how they select language. Speakers take into account their evaluations of differences or similarities in their relative social power, status or expertise, emotional or affective distance or closeness, and the extent of their regular contact.

A Teaching-Speaking Cycle

Building on some of the concepts presented above. I will now present a teaching-speaking cycle (Goh and Burns, 2012, p. 153) for planning a holistic and sequenced series of speaking activities (Figure 2). The model aims to highlight a number of key concepts that teachers can draw on to guide their students:

- Use a wide range of speech enabling skills
- Develop fluency in expression of meaning
- Use grammar flexibly to produce a wide range of utterances that can express meaning precisely
- Use appropriate vocabulary and accurate language forms relevant to their speaking needs
- Understand and use social and linguistic conventions of speech for various contexts
- Employ appropriate oral communication and discourse strategies
- Increase awareness of genre and genre structures
- Increase metacognitive awareness about L2 speaking
- Manage and self-regulate their own speaking development (Goh & Burns, 2012, pp. 151-152)

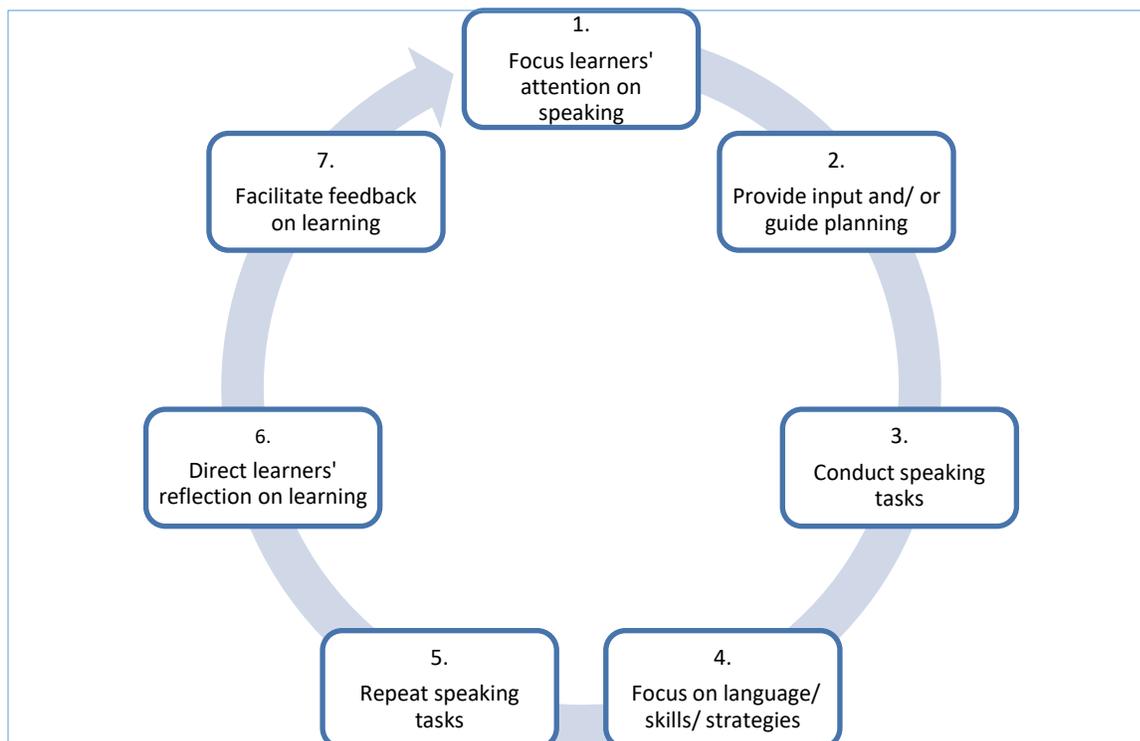


Figure 2: The Teaching-Speaking Cycle

1. Focus learners' attention on speaking

This first stage is to do with raising metacognitive awareness about speaking and has two main purposes:

a) to encourage learners to plan for overall speaking development

Learners are given prompts to encourage them to think about the demands of speaking and how they can prepare themselves for it.

b) to prepare learners to approach a specific speaking task

Here, prompts focus on the speaking task that has been planned for the teaching cycle. Learners prepare by familiarising themselves with the outcomes of the task and considering strategies they need to complete it.

Example task

It is useful to spend time thinking about your own learning processes. To help you get started here are some simple questions. Write short responses to each one.

- What is your main reason for learning to speak English?
- What do you like most about learning to speak English? Is there anything you do not like?
- Do you feel nervous or anxious when you speak English?
- List three things about your speaking that you would like to improve?

Provide input and/or guide planning

Speaking in a second language can create a great deal of anxiety for language learners, and so it is very important that teachers provide support for the speaking task, giving learners time for planning what to say and how to say it. The purposes of this preparation stage include:

- introducing or teaching new language
- enabling learners to reorganise their developing linguistic knowledge
- activating existing linguistic knowledge
- recycling specific language items, and easing processing load
- pushing learners to interpret tasks in more demanding ways

(Skehan 1998, pp.137-139)

This stage involves scaffolding learning in preparation to meet the demands of the speaking task. Maybin, Mercer and Steirer (1992, p. 188) explain the concept of scaffolding as: ...not just any assistance which helps a learner accomplish a task. It is help which will enable a learner to accomplish a task which they would not have been quite able to manage on their own, and it is help which is intended to bring the learner closer to a state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete such a task on their own.

Example task

Explaining a Procedure or Process: Planning and Rehearsing

Part I Guidelines to help you prepare for the task

1) Identify a topic you are interested in or know quite a lot about (e.g. How to do make your favourite food)

2) Write the main points you want to cover in the space provided below:

i)
ii)
iii

3) Write down a phrase or an expression you would use to show that you will be moving from point i to point ii and then on to point iii.

i) } _____
ii) } _____
iii) } _____

Part II Rehearsal (*Optional*)

Practise giving the explanation. Use the points you have made and link your ideas by using the signposting words you have just identified. Don't write down everything you want to say, so that you can practise bringing in different points!

Stage 3: Conduct speaking tasks

The purpose of this stage is to provide learners with a context where they can practise speaking through a communicative task. The task should encourage the learners to express meaning with whatever linguistic knowledge, skills and strategies they have. In other words, this stage of the cycle encourages learners to develop fluency of expression without having to pay too much attention to accuracy of form. This stages should be less demanding for the learners because of the teacher-guided or individual pre-task planning that has taken place in Stage 2.

Stage 4: Focus on language/skills/strategies

Stage 4 of the cycle is aimed at creating opportunities for learners to improve language accuracy, as well as to enhance their effective use of skills and strategies. In this stage, the teacher draws learners' attention to selected parts of the fluency task they have completed that need attention. The parts could include language features such as pronunciation, grammar and text structures, as well as vocabulary.

Stage 5: Repeat speaking tasks

At this stage, learners carry out the speaking task(s) from Stage 3 again. The difference between Stage 3 and Stage 5 is that learners have now had a chance to analyse and practise selected language items or skills during Stage 4. Therefore, they are able to apply this knowledge to enhance their performance. Repetitions could be carried out by:

1. Repeating parts of the original task
2. Repeating the entire task
3. Having students change groups or partners

4. Introducing a new task similar to the one learners have just done (e.g. instead of instructions about making your favourite food, learners could give instructions about a topic of their own choice, so that they rehearse a procedure genre again).

Stage 6: Direct learners’ reflection on learning

Stage 6 encourages learners to self-regulate their learning through monitoring and evaluating what they have learnt from the preceding stages. Reflection can be done individually, in pairs, or even in small groups. Individual and group reflection often has a cathartic effect on learners who may be feeling stressed and anxious, and think that they are the only ones feeling that way. Learners’ reflection should be guided by different types of metacognitive knowledge, and can focus on one or more of the following points:

- demands of the speaking tasks which they have become aware of
- the strategies that are useful to meet the demands of the task
- their informal assessment of their capabilities and performance
- areas of their performance that show improvement
- areas to be further improved
- plans for improving specific areas

Below is an example of some general prompts that can be used for reflection. They can be used in a handout for learners to complete or as headings for learners’ journals. Teachers can also encourage their learners to start their own written or audio blogs to record their experiences about learning to speak another language.

Example prompts for learner reflections on learning

<p>Reflecting on My Speaking Performance</p> <p>1) In this week’s lessons, I learnt to do the following in spoken English:</p> <p>2) I also learnt to use the following useful expressions that can help me speak more effectively:</p> <p>3) This is how I feel about my learning this week:</p> <p>a. I am confident that I can do this again ()</p> <p>b. I am not very confident that I can do this again ()</p> <p>c. I am still unsure about what I have to say and do in such a situation.</p> <p><i>(Put a tick next to the sentence that best describes how you feel right now.</i></p>	<p>Your teacher’s / classmate’s response:</p>
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Stage 7: Facilitate feedback on learning

In this final stage of the Teaching Speaking Cycle, the teacher provides learners with feedback on their performance in earlier stages of the cycle, for example:

- comments or grades on an individual learner’s skills and performance from observation sheets used during the speaking task
- exchange of written individual learner reflections and comments on each other’s progress and achievements

- consolidated comments from the teacher based on written reflections from the class
- written comments in learners' journals
- comments and informal assessment in learner blogs

The cycle that has just been presented is not meant to be completed in just one or two lessons. It is an overall approach to supporting and scaffolding the learning of speaking skills and strategies that can be introduced and extended over several lessons or even a unit of work. A cycle, could for example, consist of a series of lessons based on a specific theme or topic.

Conclusion

For teachers, what is relevant about the cycle is that it assists them to focus systematically on planning each component, and to develop appropriate tasks and materials for learners at different stages of learning. It also takes into account activities that engage learners at the cognitive and affective levels. In other words, it emphasises the following aspects:

1. The teaching of speaking should foreground the respective roles played by the teacher, the learner and the materials.
2. The main aim of speaking tasks is to help students develop the fluency of expert speakers where meaning is communicated with few hesitations and in a manner that is appropriate for the social purpose of the message. This is achieved through
 - the use of accurate language and discourse routines,
 - appropriate speech enabling skills, and
 - effective communication strategies.
3. Learners' speaking performance can be enhanced through pre-task planning and task repetition, as these activities can reduce cognitive load during speech processing.
4. Learning involves noticing key information and storing it in long term memory. Activities that focus learners' attention on language, skills and strategies are therefore an important part of teaching speaking.
5. Activities that help learners develop metacognitive knowledge and self-regulation of their speaking and learning processes are also needed to address affective and other cognitive demands of learning to speak a second language.

By planning lessons according to the stages in the Teaching Speaking Cycle, teachers can address all these concerns and provide valuable scaffolding for learners as they engage in speaking tasks. Learners will not only practise expressing meaning using their existing language resources, but they will also receive timely input and guidance for improving their performance from their teachers.

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Anne Burns is Professor of TESOL at the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia, where she works with doctoral students, and Professor Emerita in Language Education at Aston University, Birmingham, UK. She is known internationally for her work in action research and in the teaching of speaking. She is an academic advisor to Oxford University Press and a senior

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