Teaching Speaking

1. Defining the Speaking Skill

Speaking is one the four language skills and is the most important and frequently used skill in any setting. It is the means through which human beings transfer information and maintain social relationships through communication, expression of opinions, feelings, hopes, and intentions. People who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language.

According to Cora and Knight (2000), speaking is the act of producing and generating spoken language in order to deliver a message in a variety of situations and contexts.

It is a process of interaction where speakers intend to build meaning through producing, receiving, and processing information (Bailey, 2005).

It is a complicated skill which involves linguistic (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, accuracy and fluency), social, cultural, psychological, and paralinguistic components.

Florez (1999) defines speaking as an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking.

**2. What makes speaking difficult?**  
There are some idiosyncrasies of spoken language that make listening skills somewhat difficult to acquire. These same characteristics must be taken into account in the productive generation of speech, but with a slight twist in that the learner is now the producer.

**1. Clustering**Fluent speech is phrasal, not word by word.

**2. Redundancy**  
The speaker has an opportunity to make meaning clearer through the redundancy of language.   
**3. Reduced forms**  
Contractions, elisions, reduced vowels, etc., all form special problems in teaching spoken English. Students who don't learn colloquial contractions can sometimes develop a stilted,  
bookish quality of speaking that in turn stigmatizes them.  
**4. Performance variables**  
One of the advantages of spoken language is that the process of thinking as you speak allows you to manifest a certain number of performance hesitations, pauses, backtracking, and corrections. Learners can actually be taught how to pause and hesitate. For example, in English our "thinking time" is not silent; we insert certain "fillers" such as *uh, urn, well,you know, I mean, like,* etc. One of the most salient differences between native and nonnative speakers of a language is in their hesitation phenomena.  
**5. Colloquial language**  
Make sure your students are reasonably well acquainted with the words, idioms, and phrases of colloquial language and that they get practice in producing these forms.

**6. Rate of delivery**   
Another salient characteristic of fluency is rate of delivery. One of your tasks in teaching spoken English is to help learners achieve an acceptable speed along with other attributes of fluency.  
**7. Stress, rhythm, and intonation**This is the most important characteristic of English pronunciation. The stress-timed rhythm of spoken English and its intonation patterns convey important messages.  
**8. Interaction**  
Learning to produce waves of language in a vacuum-without interlocutors-would rob speaking skill of its richest component: the creativity of conversational negotiation.

**3. Reasons for teaching speaking**

**Rehearsal:** Speaking activities provide **rehearsal opportunities** (i.e. chances to practise real-life speaking in the classroom). For example, making students take part in a role-play at an airport check-in desk, allows them to rehearse this real-life event in the safety of the classroom. This gives students the feeling of what communicating in the foreign language really feels like.

**Feedback:** speaking tasks in which students try to use any or all of the language they know provide *feedback* for both teacher and students. Teachers can see how their class is doing and what language problems they are having; students can also see how easy they find a particular kind of speaking and what they need to do to improve.

**Engagement:** Good speaking activities can and should be extremely engaging for the students. If they are all participating fully - and if the teacher has set up the activity properly and can then give sympathetic and useful feedback - they will get tremendous satisfaction from it.

**Automaticity:** the more students have opportunities to *activate* the various elements of language they have stored in their brains, the more automatic their use of these elements become. As a result, students gradually become autonomous language users. This means that they will be able to use words and phrases fluently without very much conscious thought.

**Internalization:** Students are more likely to **internalise** and **improve** the target language if they are provided with **purposeful speaking** tasks/activities that go further than controlled language practice and the linguistic, phonological aspects  
**4. Classroom Speaking Activities**

Harmer (2007) suggested many activitiesthat can be used in the classroom to develop speaking.

**1. Role play**: In this activity, the teacher assigns roles for students to play. This might involve writing a script for students to perform. The teacher should not interrupt and correct students’ mistakes as the focus in on fluency more than accuracy.

**2.** **Discussion**: Generally speaking, discussion, whether spontaneous or planned, has the great advantage of provoking fluent language use.It is important to give students ***pre-discussion*** rehearsal time to explore the discussion topic before organising a discussion with the whole class.

3. **Information-gap activities**: When two persons have different information that they need to exchange so as to complete the whole picture, this is called ‘information gap’. This ‘gap’ that exists between them should motivate them to talk with each other.

**4. Telling stories:** the teacher can draw on this by asking students to tell stories of things that happened to them in the past. Further, he can encourage students to invent stories based on given cues or drawings. Also, the teacher can ask them to ***re-tell*** famous stories in their own ways.

**5. Balloon debate:** it is a debate in which a number of speakers attempt to win the approval of an audience. A group of students are in the basket of a balloon which is losing air. Only one person can stay in the balloon and survive (the others have to jump out). Individual students representing famous characters (Napoleon, Ghandi, Cleopatra, etc.) or professions (teacher, doctor, lawyer, etc.) have to argue why they should be allowed to survive.

**6. Favourite objects:** This activity is another way of getting students to tell stories. However, the stories here are very personal and connected with one’s personal life and the objects s/he prefers. Students are encouraged to think about how they would describe their favourite objects in terms of when they got them, why they got them, what they normally do with them, why they are so important to them, and whether there are any stories associated with them. In groups, they then tell each other about their objects, and the groups tell the class about which was the most unusual/interesting, etc. in their group.

7. **Oral presentations**: This activity can be described as an advanced one since it might need advanced skills in the target language. Here individual students give a talk on a given topic. The rest of students listening to the student presenting something should be given some kind of listening tasks, such as giving feedback.

**5. The teacher’s role during the speaking activities**The teacher’s role is very important during the speaking activities. He should:  
- Be a guide on the side and not a sage on the stage;  
- Facilitate interactions without dominating them;  
- Organise interactions and write scripts;  
- Monitor students’ performance and write notes;  
- Give feedback to help students to improve their future performance;  
- Re-teach certain aspects if necessary based on weaknesses observed in his/her notes;  
- Intervene sometimes when the activity does not go smoothly;  
- Provide corrections but only after the activity is over;  
- Provide any tools(e.g. cards, charts, and objects) necessary for carrying out the activity.

6. **Main principles and guidelines for teaching speaking**

-Language teachers should consider the fact that **oral language**, because of its circumstances of production, tends to differ from **written language** in its typical grammatical, lexical, and discourse patters. The implication here is that oral skills and oral language should be **practised** and **assessed** under **different conditions** from written skills, and therefore teaching should be adjusted accordingly.  
- Learning to speak in a second or foreign language will be **facilitated** when learners are **actively engaged** in attempting to communicate.

- Both **bottom-up** processes (in which the learner starts from the small fragments and proceeds to the whole) and **top-down** processes (in which the learner starts from the whole thing, and then gradually divide it into smaller segments) are important for speaking, and therefore the teacher should draw on both to help his/her students to speak up and use the  
language functionally.

- All speaking activities should focus in a **balanced** manner on both **accuracy** and **fluency**. A main focus on accuracy could restrict learners’ free production of the target language making them unable to speak naturally, and thus it encourages a less exploratory or fluent use of the language. On the other hand, a main focus on fluency might encourage greater use of formulaic chunks of language, discouraging attention to accuracy (and thus an inaccurate linguistic output will result) and reducing speakers’ capacity for processing complex language).

**7. Addressing fluency and accuracy**

Two dimensions of spoken English are often referred to when describing a speaker's oral language ability: fluency and accuracy.

**1. Fluency** Fluency involves maintaining the flow of speech without disruptive pauses, restarts and breakdowns. It usually develops when students have a good grasp of grammar, vocabulary  
and fixed expressions, and can access them automatically and can focus on the meanings  
they wish to express without being distracted by a search for grammar or vocabulary or  
the correct expression. Bygate (2005: 79) suggests that repeating an activity can help develop fluency. For example, a student might share a personal recount in a group and then retell the same recount with other groups or repeat it on a different occasion.

**2. Accuracy** Accuracy conventionally refers to features of grammar, pronunciation and word choice, but, there are many other aspects of spoken language that are involved in oral communication, including choosing appropriate topics, using language that matches the formality or informality of the occasion and using conventions associated with different genres – such as conventional ways of opening and closing small talk and conversations.

**8.** **Correcting speaking**

When students are repeating sentences, trying to get their pronunciation exactly right, then the teacher will often correct (appropriately) every time there’s a problem But, if the same teacher did this while students were involved in a passionate discussion about whether smoking should be banned on tourist beaches, for example, the effect might well be to destroy the conversational flow. Constant interruption from the teacher will destroy the purpose of the speaking activity.

Many teachers watch and listen while speaking activities are taking place. They note  
down things that seemed to go well and times when students couldn’t make themselves understood or made important mistakes. When the activity has finished, they then ask the students how they thought it went before giving their own feedback. They may say that they liked the way Student A said this, and the way Student B was able to disagree with her. They will then say that they did hear one or two mistakes, and they can either discuss them with the class, write them on the board or give them individually to the students concerned.