22 Focus on speaking skills

A Warm-up

1 Look at the questions below and think about how you would answer them. When you are ready, discuss them in small groups.

1 What languages (other than your own) can you speak?
2 In your experiences as a language learner, how much did you speak in lessons? Did you enjoy lessons that focused on speaking?
3 What skills and knowledge does someone need to be able to speak a language?
4 What makes speaking a language other than your own difficult?

2 Report back your discussions to the class.

> 'Speaking' is so much part of daily life that we take it for granted. However, learning speaking, whether in a first or other language, involves developing subtle and detailed knowledge about why, how and when to communicate …
>
> Burns and Seidlhofer, 2020

B Speaking activities

1 Like writing, speaking is both an important skill in its own right, and also a vehicle for practising new language items. Look at the four activities below. For each, say whether the emphasis is on speaking for communication, or language practice.

1 The teacher shows pictures of famous places around the world. The learners respond with *I have(n't) been to Rome,* etc.
2 The teacher asks the learners about the places that they would most like to visit and why. The learners respond.
3 The learners work in small groups to compare their ideal jobs.
4 The learners work in small groups to compare their answers to a grammar exercise.

2 The following activities focus on speaking for communication. Which of the following five activity types have you experienced as a learner? Which did you enjoy?

Discussion activity

The activity in A above is an example of a discussion activity. Of course, for learners of English the questions could be changed so that there is a focus on a topic of interest to the learners.

Role play

Look at the scenario on the next page. Your teacher will allocate you one of the roles. Take a few minutes to think about your role and plan the arguments you wish to put forward.
There will be a meeting between the headteacher at a school, a teacher at the school and a student representative.

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Role: Headteacher You are new to the school and want to show that you listen to students' views. On the other hand, you do not want to upset your staff. You will chair the meeting.

Role: Teacher You believe that mobile phones are being used excessively in lessons. They stop students focusing on the lesson and it is clear that many students are using social media rather than studying. You think mobile phones should be banned in the classroom. Put your arguments forward at the meeting.

Role: Student representative You represent your class. You know that one or two students use their phones for social media in lessons but most of them are using phones to check facts and find additional information relevant to the lesson. Put the case for using mobile phones in lessons at the meeting.

Conversation

The teacher begins by asking the learners their views on a topical issue of interest. The teacher encourages the learners to ask, as well as answer, questions. They may address these to the teacher or other learners. As the conversation develops, so other topics might be introduced.

Information gap

An activity type where the information required to complete the task is distributed across two or more learners, meaning that they must communicate in order to complete the task successfully. See the Unit 34 task on pages 181 and 183 for an example.

Survey and presentation

1 In groups of four, prepare a survey on the topic: *Are you a good language learner?*
Prepare six questions that you will ask the other students in the class.
For example: *Do you do the homework that the teacher gives us?*
a always b sometimes c never
2 Form new groups, so that each student in the new group comes from one of the original groups. Ask the other students your questions, and make a note of their answers.
3 Return to your original group. Share the results of your survey. Prepare a presentation of your findings. Use expressions like *Five out of ten students always do their homework*. Draw some conclusions from your survey. For example, *It would be good if we could listen to more songs in English. This would improve our listening skills …*
4 Present your findings and conclusions to the class.

3 Look at the five different activity types above again. For each activity type, answer the following questions.

a Could it be used with classes at a range of levels?
b Could it be used with a range of class types and sizes?
c Is there a purpose to the activity? Is there an outcome?
d Could it be used in both online and face-to-face lessons?

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4 Look again at the activities and answer the following questions.
   a Which activities encourage learners to share personal information and opinions?
   b Which activities could be set up so that the grammar and vocabulary required by the learners can be predicted by the teacher, and even pre-taught if necessary?
   c What would the teacher's role be before, during and after these activities?

C Giving advice: concerns of learners

Look at these comments from learners on speaking lessons. What advice could you give to them and/or their teachers?

1 'We do some speaking in class, but it is dominated by a few students and some of us don't say anything.'
2 'I get very anxious that when I try to use English no one will understand me.'
3 'I'm in a B2 class and I can speak OK, so speaking in class is a bit of a waste of time.'
4 'Speaking is so important for me and I want to practise outside class, but don't know how.'

D Giving advice: concerns of teachers

Look at these comments from teachers on speaking lessons. What advice could you give to them?

1 'I know I should correct mistakes, but I sometimes have trouble hearing the students when they work in pairs and so I don't know what to correct.'
2 'When I use breakout rooms I worry. I can't be in every room and so I don't know what learners are doing.'
3 'I am afraid of using too much pair and group work because the students sometimes use their own language.'
4 'The book I am using has some interesting speaking activities, but I cannot find a grammar point to link to them.'

KEY WORDS FOR TEACHERS

Check you know the meanings of these terms.

- *information gap*
- *role play*
- *monitoring*
- *outcome*
- *speaking for communication*

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REFLECTION

Work with a partner from another TP group. Look at the books that you are using with your respective groups and choose one speaking activity from each. For the purposes of this activity, ensure that it focuses on speaking for communication, as opposed to solely practising a particular language point. Consider the following questions.

1 Do you like the material? Would you be happy to use it with the appropriate group?
2 Choose one of the pieces of material. How could you make it maximally productive? For example, how could you ensure that as many learners as possible are speaking as much of the time as possible?
3 Write the stages you would go through in order to exploit the material. Would you adapt the material in any way?
4 As the teacher, what would you need to do before, during and after the activities?

Reference

Burns, A. and Seidlhofer, B. (2020). Speaking and Pronunciation. In N. Schmitt and M. Rodgers (eds.), *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics* (3rd edition). Abingdon: Routledge.

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