CRITERIAS FOR CREATING SPEAKING ACTIVITIES OF LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract
In this article we aim to discuss some relevant ideas for having effective and helpful activities to reach higher speaking level. Firstly, we should know the purpose of speaking activity what we want to focus on, fluency or accuracy? We need to keep these questions in mind when preparing a speaking task.

Keywords: monitor, participants, interlocutor, topic-based, prompt, differentiate.

Introduction

Our decisions will depend on our students' level and needs and on the overall purpose of the lesson. In exam-oriented classrooms for example, teachers may want to focus more on accuracy during a speaking task and on providing their ss with the adequate practice on topics for discussion that they might encounter in their language exams. Identifying context helps students to guess the vocabulary and skills they will use and come across during the conversation. Once the conversation has started, they can monitor the situation, not only by listening, but by attending to tone of voice, body language, gesture and facial expression. In other situations, students may have to assess the situation on the spot. Encourage students to think about the situation, the place, the purpose of speaking, the participants, speaker's relationship to them, topics of conversation and is it formal, informal or very colloquial language?

Once they have assessed the situation, and before entering into any spoken exchange, speakers should try to call to mind some of the language they might need and think about an appropriate way of starting the conversation. Encourage students, once the conversation has started, to listen carefully, note key words and pay attention to any visual clues. A good way of practising this is to use two volunteers and give them a card with roles and a topic to discuss. Encourage a third student to approach them and join the conversation.

Materials and discussion

Sometimes we all just need a bit of extra time to think about what we want to say and how we want to say it. Try to encourage your students to get into the habit of avoiding using too many fillers, like "Umm…" and "Err…" Here are some pieces of advice you can share with your learners to help them: If you are presenting, don't just start speaking immediately. Gather yourself, pause and breathe before you start. Also, feel free to pause if you have just made a point and you would like people to consider it. Also, feel free to pause between sections of a presentation. When answering a question, use a phrase that signals you are thinking, and a pause that shows you are considering your response. People appreciate others thinking before they speak and if you signal this is what you are doing, they will stay with you (provided the pause is not too long!) For example: "That's interesting. It's not something I've really thought about." (pause and look away slightly – but not down at your feet!)

It's good to get your students to practise presentations, even if they are quite short. The counterpoint to this is to get students to practise responding immediately to questions - try something like a hot-seating activity, where students have to respond immediately to lots of quick-fire questions from the rest of the class. Learners should feel confident to ask for repetition and clarification if they have not understood something the first time. This is natural and we do it in conversation all the time. Here are some useful phrases you can teach your students:

- "Could explain what you mean in a bit more detail?"
- "I'm not sure I quite understand. Could you explain it in a different way?"
- "Sorry, could you say that again?"

If students don't know or can't remember a word or phrase, tell them not to worry. It happens to us all – even native speakers. Just talk around it. You can even acknowledge that you don't know or can't think of the right word. People don't mind if you keep the conversation flowing and continue to communicate effectively - and you are likely to get credited for your skill in managing this. I certainly give students credit for this if I am grading an oral exam. Why not teach one or more of the following phrases:

"I don't know the exact word but it's…." "I don't know what it's called, but it's…"

Simply tell them to add a description of what it looks like or what it's used for or both! When setting up a speaking task, we always need to keep in mind that certain issues might arise during the activity:

- Our learners may switch to L1
- Ss may not have the adequate vocabulary in order to express themselves in the TL
- Some ss ask too many questions during the speaking task, they want feedback, they want to know that what they say is accurate
- Some ss may be too focused on using correct grammar/lexis when they speak

- Others may be too shy, they may lack confidence and not be willing to participate in a group conversation
- Ss may not know what to say on the subject or may feel unable to formulate their thoughts and express themselves on the spot
- The topic for discussion may not be stimulating enough or relevant to our learners' level, needs, age or interests
- Discipline issues may arise in large groups of ss
- Participation may not be even: some may dominate the activity and talk more than others.

We should focus on motivating our learners, activating their schemata, providing them with clear, interesting topics for discussion and thus giving them a reason to want to take part in the task. During the activity, our main role should be that of a facilitator, making sure that the task is being carried out smoothly and that all learners participate equally. We must also try to reduce TTT (teacher talking time), step away from the central scene, monitor from a distance and try not to interrupt the flow of the activity.

Our focus should be on setting up interesting and stimulating speaking activities. Variety in the topics for discussion and in the task types plays an important role here. Variety kills boredom and triggers our learners' interest. For younger learners the options may be more limited, but for intermediate classes and above, the choices are many: tasks could be based on a specific topic or they could be more goal-oriented, with ss having to perform something or use the language for communicative purposes. It is important to allow ss to take the lead here.

Some brainstorming with the entire class before the speaking task, could be very useful to our learners. Depending on the type of the activity and their level, we could give them some input, some ideas and language chunks that they might find useful, so they will be able to express themselves more freely during the task. This of course is not always necessary and depends on our learners' level and background knowledge on the topic for discussion.

Results

Allowing enough time for our learners to think and prepare for the task is also important. Some classrooms could also benefit from some instructions on the rules of group discussion. Our ss may need some training on turn-taking, on how to work in groups and on respecting the time limits and different opinions.

Let us always keep in mind that one of the main goals of speaking activities is for our students to achieve successful oral communication in the target language. It is important to boost their confidence, to help them speak more spontaneously in the TL and 'get the message across'.

Since we would not want to interrupt the flow of the activity, error correction should take place at the end of the speaking task, focusing mainly on frequent errors that hinder communication. It is important to remember that the extent to which we should focus on error correction depends on our ss' level and needs and on the purpose of the specific speaking.

There are many different ways you can get your students to 25ractice using these expressions. For example: have a stack of word cards or picture cards. Without showing the rest of the class or group, students take turns in describing the words or pictures on the cards, without naming them. The rest of the class or group have to guess what is being described. Who can successfully describe the most objects in a minute? Students often want to get things exactly right when they are speaking, and this can lead to them becoming shy or reticent. Understandably, they don't want to feel foolish or embarrass themselves in front of their peers. Ironically, in my experience, this is often more pronounced with higher-level students, as they are more self-critical. Because of this, it is important to emphasise to your students that everyone makes errors when talking. Even native speakers do it – they are just better at repairing errors when they occur.

Conclusion

In conclusion, give your students plenty of practice of fluency-based activities. The important thing is to make clear the focus is on fluency and communication. Clearly differentiate these kinds of activities and tasks from those where you are looking for a high degree of control and accuracy. The important thing here is fluency and communication. The more learners practice these kinds of activities, the more confident they will become. Start with shorter activities centred around Q and A or short role-plays. As they become more confident, work towards longer speaking activities such as discussions, debates and problem-solving tasks. For higher-level students, you might like to check out our 'Discuss This' cards which provide a wealth of topic-based picture prompts and discussion topics, along with ideas for follow-up activities.

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