

Developing fluency in spoken English

In the ESL classroom, oral fluency is a skill that needs consistent practice to see noticeable progress. When we talk about fluency in general, we're talking about the flow of speech, the speed at which students speak, the pauses, and the language that students can readily produce between those pauses. In an ideal world, everyday exposure to the English language via regular communication with English speakers on a variety of topics is the best way to learn to speak English fluently. Unfortunately, relatively few English learners have an opportunity to practice speaking in a truly immersive setting. It is surprising how many international students return home after spending years in an English-speaking country with limited English-speaking ability. They often find themselves in a community with many students who speak their language. As a result, they may not be getting as much opportunity to use English outside of class as we might imagine. This just highlights the importance of providing regular speaking opportunities in the classroom. This article focuses on how teachers can provide these opportunities in the classroom so that students can build confidence and develop their fluency. There are a few things to consider when it comes to helping students develop their oral fluency.



Focus on student needs

Before conducting any speaking activity, it is important to think about the type of speaking skills that your students need. Do your students need to practice their everyday communication skills, or do they have other important professional or academic communication needs? Once you have a clear awareness of your students' communication needs, you can plan and create lessons that can cater directly to them. As an example, let's look at how you could implement professional and academic speaking activities to develop your students' oral fluency at more advanced levels. For students looking to develop their professional and academic speaking skills, you might consider incorporating more discussions and presentations. These are often vital skills to build upon at more advanced levels, as they help students become more proficient with longer and more structured speech and develop improved fluency and coherence in expressing their ideas. There are a number of resources that you can use in the [Discussions EAP Worksheets and Activities](#) section, which can help you to introduce and break down some essential oral skills for academic purposes.

It is also helpful to think about the function or reasons for incorporating certain speaking tasks in the classroom. If students have a need to use English when they are out in the local community, you might have them engage in free conversation or [small talk](#), where they focus on skills such as turn-taking or the sharing of personal experiences. If the objective of the speaking activity is to successfully convey a message where it is understood by the listener, you might get students to participate in activities such as information gaps, interviews, or role-plays. One example of this would be to get students to practice [making phone calls](#), leaving voicemail messages, or [ordering food](#). If the objective is to get students to speak in front of an audience, they can practice this through oral presentations or reports, or even through in-class debates.

Provide relevant input

Give careful consideration to the topics that you select for your speaking activities. Research supports the inclusion of familiar and relevant topics which help to sustain student engagement and motivation in speaking activities. With this in mind, try to design speaking activities that

create an interest in or need for communicating. Some topics that work well at all levels include [hobbies and free time](#), [daily routines](#), [food](#), [culture](#), or [relationships](#). Most teachers would agree that when their students can relate to a topic, their classes are livelier, and students are more eager to participate.

Another thing to keep in mind is to ensure that students have enough input or language to use when participating in speaking tasks. Before conducting a speaking activity, think about whether students have sufficient background knowledge and language to communicate on the topic. For learners who have difficulty speaking on the spot, scaffold the speaking activity and start with a warm-up. You can [brainstorm](#) words as a class or get them to create word maps with graphic organizers. It also helps to provide access to topic vocabulary, phrases, or main ideas to provide learners with context. Other ways to provide input are by giving students a short reading on the assigned topic, or simply by giving students a minute or two to quickly produce a basic outline or mind map if asked to give mini-presentations in small groups. Studies show that preparation time before speaking helps students to process and focus better on speaking tasks and reduces hesitations and stumbles.

Teach common language chunks and phrases

When teaching conversation for lower-level learners, prepare lists of useful phrases and sentences on each conversation topic. You can provide fixed conversational phrases that do not require English grammar knowledge for functions such as [greetings](#) or [agreeing and disagreeing](#). Take for instance the following phrases used in small talk when meeting someone for the first time:

"Hi, my name's And you?"
"It's nice to meet you."
"Where are you from?"
"What do you do?"

Teaching these fixed conversational phrases is useful because with consistent use, the language becomes more automatic, and learners get closer to mastering the use of these set phrases correctly in different contexts. Teaching fixed-conversational phrases is also valuable because you can follow up with a lesson that helps students to continue or sustain a conversation. One way to do this is by teaching the following useful language for reacting to something someone says:

"That's interesting!"
"Wow!"
"Really?"
"Me too!"
"Is that right?"

You could have students work in pairs to add these reactions to a dialogue. Then, ask the students to practice the dialogue using these reactions. As a final step, students can create their own dialogue and add the appropriate reactions. A follow-up lesson could be to have students recount an experience to sustain a conversation. Sometimes conversations may be cut short because students may not know what else to say. In this case, it's a great idea to have students practice giving detailed explanations or summaries of events or stories to help them keep conversations going. Another way to continue a conversation would be to get students to practice asking follow-up questions. Activities like 'Find someone who...' are ideal for this purpose.

Focus on fluency

A key indicator of more advanced-level language users is good fluency. Fluency has been known to improve when a bit of urgency is introduced to speaking tasks. The 4/3/2 method is an activity used by many teachers that encourages students to speak more fluidly by giving them the chance to manage issues related to pauses and hesitations. This is because the activity involves practicing a talk multiple times, which allows students to account for any errors or issues after each subsequent turn. To understand how the 4/3/2 method works, have a look at [4-3-2 Presentation Fluency](#) in our Academic English section. The 4/3/2 method helps students develop more structured communication and develop more coherence as they attempt to link specific and relevant ideas together. Studies have shown that as students progress through the activity, their speech becomes more condensed, specific, and even more confident.

The importance of pronunciation

For many students, pronunciation is not a significant barrier to attaining fluency. However, it should not be neglected as incorrect pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication. Some students may struggle with pronunciation in English, mainly because there is no one-to-one correspondence between spelling and sound. It is also important for learners to be familiar with stress and intonation in English words and within sentences. For example, certain words can change from nouns to verbs and vice versa just by changing the stress from the first to the second syllable. In natural speech, English words are often connected or chunked together. Native speakers also tend to stress certain words in a sentence for emphasis to convey a particular meaning. A learner, therefore, needs guidance on these particular pronunciation features because they may not be present in their first language. Some activities that can help with pronunciation are, of course, the traditional repetition drills, or ones that ask students to listen and shadow the pronunciation of speakers in English songs or English videos. It is also helpful to practice reading aloud with narrative texts, or even by creating dialogues and having students present them.

Implementing feedback during speaking activities

Feedback is important during speaking activities, but it's important to note that too much feedback can raise affective filters. The affective filter can be thought of as a mental or emotional block that impedes a learner's progress. The affective filter has been known to affect students' language production in the classroom. When the affective filter is high, it is usually because the student is stressed, anxious or self-conscious, resulting in a lack of confidence, and a reluctance to speak, participate or collaborate. Sometimes it also manifests as disinterest or boredom. On the contrary, when the filter is low, students feel safe and are more comfortable taking risks with using the language.

As teachers, we should ensure that affective filters remain low. One of the main roadblocks for many students towards developing fluency is high affective filters present in the classroom. It is always good to preface at the start of an activity, that any corrections or suggestions are made to help students be understood, especially to ensure that students do not lose face when being corrected. Echoing is a great way to provide feedback because it is less direct. When students make mistakes while speaking, rephrase the incorrect statement in a grammatically correct way and say it back to the student in an encouraging tone. You could also save the corrections for the end of the class by doing mini-lessons. Perhaps you overheard many of your students omitting articles, using incorrect prepositions, making word choice errors, or using awkward phrasing. In this case, a mini-lesson at the end of an activity helps to reinforce any corrections or suggestions to the general student body rather than targeting and putting a student on the spot.

Final Thoughts

Developing oral fluency takes time and effort on the part of the student, and effective planning, guidance, and patience on the part of the teacher. With that being said, we can see that many factors need to be considered before conducting speaking activities. Teachers need to determine the speaking skills that students need to work on and whether the students have sufficient or relevant input. It is also important to include useful lists of fixed conversational phrases or chunks and to teach strategies that can help students sustain conversations. We've also discussed the effectiveness of setting time limits such as the widely used 4/3/2 method and some key aspects of pronunciation. Finally, the way that feedback is implemented during speaking activities is of utmost importance, as this can make or break the success of a speaking activity as well as your students' ability to progress or develop fluency. By taking these factors into account, teachers can help their students to develop into more confident and competent speakers of English.