
UNIT 7 DEVELOPING SPEAKING/ORAL SKILLS

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will enable you to:

- understand the two major aspects of the teaching of oral skills
- identify and distinguish between the needs of learners
- familiarise yourself with some accepted techniques in teaching oral skills
- understand and differentiate between writing and speaking activities
- understand, analyse and evaluate the importance of group work in developing oral skills

- enumerate and identify the characteristics of an effective speaking class
- study and analyse the different stages of a speaking lesson
- examine the role of the teacher in the oral skills class.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

Oral skills have two major components. First, there are **motor perceptive skills**. These are the means of perceiving, recalling and articulating in the correct order the sounds and structure of a language. Generally, these are developed at the primary level where learners are put through various **look and say exercises**, or **pattern practice**. Usually, there is no context provided and learners develop these skills through repetition and choral drill. Martin Bygate likens this stage to 'manipulating the controls of a car on a deserted piece of road far from the flow of normal traffic.... it is like learning to drive without ever going out on the road'.

Concentration on the development of motor perceptive skills led to problems. The learner was not able 'to transfer his knowledge from a language - learning situation to a language - using situation' (Wilkins)

This is what makes the second component of oral skills namely the '**interaction skills**' important. By using this the learner will be able to transfer his/her knowledge from a language learning situation to a language use situation. Interaction skills involve knowing what to say, how to say this and how to establish and maintain contact with the other person. Examples of interaction skills are being able to ask someone the time, describe your flat to a broker, use the telephone to obtain information about train timetables, etc.

In recent years there has been a growing emphasis on the teaching and learning of conversation/oral skills. With the spread of English there is a greater demand for the learner to communicate in the target language rather than acquire a knowledge of correct structure.

For this reason, the controlled exercises used in the language class by teachers, giving practice in structures, has now given way to dynamic and meaningful oral practice.

7.2 LEARNER NEEDS

Above all, the learner needs to be able to speak intelligibly, using appropriate word stress. Some of the important functions s/he must be able to perform with the language are:-

- greeting friends, superiors, strangers
- making telephone calls, asking for information
- expressing reactions to T.V. programmes, films, plays
- seeking and giving information in class and out of class
- asking questions while playing a game, in class, in a debate
- discussing ideas
- participating in debates and discussions
- conversing with friends, strangers, teachers
- responding to questions
- advising friends, juniors, and younger members in the family
- clarifying meaning or intention
- giving a report of an event.

There could be any number of such functions of language.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Suggest five more functions of the spoken language which your students may require.

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7.3 ACCEPTED TECHNIQUES IN TEACHING CONVERSATIONAL/ORAL SKILLS

In recent years, more emphasis has been given to oral skills than in the past.

7.3.1 The Conversation Class

One of the accepted ways of teaching speech is to hold a 'conversation class'. The teacher sits with a group of learners and asks them questions about their home, family, work, etc. It is a question and answer session and is not always very productive of learning as it lacks an interesting and clearly defined topic.

7.3.2 The Topic Based Discussion Class

Another kind of fluency-based activity was the topic-based discussion. The teacher planned discussions on interesting topics. This was an improvement on the conversation class because the discussion was now structured and clear. But it lacked a purpose. Learners were not likely to feel motivated to speak on a topic merely to practise their English. This highlights a crucial fact of learning that learners need a reason to speak more than a topic to speak about.

Another disadvantage in the topic-based discussion was that it was carried out with the full class. This could be a group of 30-50 students. In a forty minute period, it is not difficult to calculate the talking time which each student would get. Most often, the discussion would be monopolised by the brighter students while the rest of the class lost interest.

7.3.3 Task Centred Fluency Practice

With the increasing importance being given to Communicative Language Teaching, task-centred fluency practice is being used more and more. In this, a group is given a task to perform through verbal interaction. It may be in the form of a group activity or role play. The group has to perform a task which has a tangible output either in the form of giving a group report, a speech or a presentation. This gives the group a concrete task to work with and clear guidelines regarding its scope. It also provides a basis for feedback.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Have you tried the three types of activities discussed in this section? Which did you find most useful? Give reasons for your answer.

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7.4 DISTINGUISHING BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT FEATURES OF WRITING AND SPEAKING

In order to teach conversation/oral skills effectively, it is important to understand the differences between speech and writing.

The language of speech is not 'spoken' writing. In oral communication we ought not to 'speak like a book'. In speech the kind of vocabulary, the structure of the sentence and its complexity varies greatly from what would be required as writing. Nor do we necessarily speak in grammatically correct sentences.

While speaking, the speaker has to plan, organise the message and also control the language. Repetition, mistakes in vocabulary and message take place. In understanding oral production, on the other hand, the learner has to process the stream of speech which might be difficult in terms of complexity or pace of speaking. While reading, the reader is in a position to re-read what s/he has not understood.

Another major difference between speech and writing is that the speech situation requires the presence of a listener. The speaker talks to a listener who generally provides some feedback on agreement or understanding. It is important for the speaker to make sure that communication is taking place, for if not, the message will have to be adapted and adjusted.

In written communication too, a certain amount of reciprocity is needed. The writer has to anticipate the reader's needs and background information and write in such a way that there are no problems in comprehension. Similarly, the reader has to strive to understand the writer's intentions. But s/he has no way of signalling understanding to the writer. The only feedback s/he provides is whether s/he will continue to read or not.

The reciprocity of the act of speech necessitates that in order to maintain the flow of speech the speaker must take notice of the listener, to allow him or her the chance to speak. It requires the speaker to take turns at speech, and also to adjust, adapt, vary the degree of formality employed according to need.

Check Your Progress 3

Write five differences between speaking and writing. You may refer to Course 3 as well for the answer.

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7.5 THE IMPORTANCE OF GROUP WORK IN DEVELOPING ORAL SKILLS

Group work has been found especially conducive in the development of oral skills. Research has given us the 2/3 formula which shows that in a 40 minute class with a strength of 40 students per class a learner gets less than a minute to participate in the speaking activity. Group work provides a framework whereby a learner can have maximum participation. In a teacher-oriented class, the amount of language practice each learner gets, is much less than in a class where learners work in groups.

Group work gives an opportunity to learners to speak in small groups, at times with their friends, and this reduces the hesitation and embarrassment which a shy learner may feel. Besides helping learners to get rid of their inhibitions, it also builds up a sense of

7.6.1 The Simplicity of the Task

The task gives a sense of purpose and direction. It should be interesting for the learner, not be too complex and within the reach of most of the class. If the teacher needs to intervene to spell out or explain the task repeatedly then learners would be wasting much of the discussion time in just listening.

7.6.2 Preparation

The task should be easy to prepare. It should not be too complex in terms of typing, duplicating, recording, etc. Teachers may not be able to hold oral skills classes regularly if the task entails too many hours of preparatory work.

7.6.3 Tangible Output or Result

A task must generate thought and its end result is in the form of a tangible output. The learners may be required to write down the result, give a short talk, make a presentation or report and so on. The tangible output or result helps learners to focus on what has to be done. It provides a clear signal to the teacher, group and others that the task is complete. In addition, it provides a basis for feedback. It is on the basis of the result and the discussions prior to it that the teacher gives feedback to the class, as a group or individually, as the case may be.

7.6.4 Language Practice

The task should be such that it provides for optimum language practice by the learners. If the task is too complex and most of the time is spent puzzling it out with no speech taking place, then the task is not an efficient one.

7.6.5 Interaction

While planning the task, care must be taken to see that the task chosen is interactive. Tasks which are open-ended, i.e. which involve the learners in brainstorming ideas, giving them the opportunity to use their own imaginative and intellectual resources are better than tasks which are 'closed-ended', i.e. which are limited by having one correct answer alone.

7.6.6 Interest Level

Much of the success of an activity depends on how interesting the task is. If the task is 'interesting' the learner motivation is high and the performance good.

If the task is too complex or difficult, learners will get discouraged quickly. If the task is too easy, learners get bored. There has to be a combination of challenge and the probability of success; the task must be hard enough to demand an effort on the part of the group members, but easy enough for it to be clear that success is within their grasp.

The subject matter of the oral skills activity should be interesting. It must be within the range of experience of the learners and at the same time not too familiar. However, it may also be argued that the more imaginative or exotic the discussion material is, the more interesting it will seem to the learners.

7.6.7 Organisation

As discussed earlier, group work is most useful in oral skills development, where learners engage in completing tasks which generate interaction.

Most often, group work fails because of lack of organisation. The teacher can ask learners to form groups of four by turning around and facing those behind. A few students can be shifted to ensure that groups are heterogeneous or homogeneous. At times, it is a good idea to let the groups be semi-permanent for a set of activities as frequent changes especially in the younger learners may lead to restlessness and indiscipline.

Check Your Progress 5

Select a speaking activity task, and discuss it in terms of the criteria mentioned in this section.

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7.7 ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The teacher has an important role in the teaching of oral skills. Although she is not in a frontal position in class, yet the entire activity can fail if the teacher is not clear of her role in the different stages of the activity.

7.7.1 Presentation

The presentation of the task should be made at the very beginning of the class. If it is done after the groups have been formed, or the materials have been given, it is likely that the learners become too involved, distracted or excited with other things and thus fail to concentrate on what is to be done.

The instructions should be crisp, clear and thorough. In case the learners do not understand what is to be done, a 'trial run' can be conducted especially if the activity is short.

7.7.2 Process

The teacher needs to plan out meticulously the various aspects of the process i.e. the way the discussion is held. At times the group needs to elect a secretary to jot down points. The learners may be required to brainstorm or to jot down their own ideas individually before sharing them with the group. The task has to be planned so that each member of the group gets a chance to contribute. At times the learner may be asked to use certain language forms or structures while participating in the discussion.

While the students are discussing, the teacher can clarify ideas, when necessary. She can join a group and contribute to the content if she finds their interest waning. The teacher also monitors if all learners are getting a chance to add to the discussion. The use of the native language can also be discouraged.

At the same time the teacher notes down common errors which the learners are making so that they can be dealt with in the feedback session later. She may find that peer-correction is taking place and will have to make her own decision about when and how to correct.

7.7.3 Ending

Some groups may finish earlier than the others. The teacher can ask them to move on to the next stage. For example, if the tangible output is to present an oral report, the speaker can rehearse the oral report in front of his group. Some groups may take too long to complete the task. If the teacher has been careful in specifying the time limit at the beginning, then, with a few reminders in between, winding up the activity will not be a problem.

7.7.4 Feedback

Often, the learners as well as the teacher may feel that the activity is over once the learners have completed the task. But the task was only a means of achieving its underlying aim, namely language practice. The activity that the learners have gone through and completed has to be assessed, appreciated, admired and evaluated from the language point of view. This is an integral part of the activity and it can be organised in a number of ways. Learners may be asked to give an oral report, make a display or read aloud. It is done in the whole class mode and rounded off by the teacher with suitable comments.

The teacher also needs to give feedback on the process. Important aspects such as discussion skills are also commented upon. Students can also join in providing comments on each other's performance.

Lastly, the teacher gives feedback on the language used in completing the task. She has already noted the language errors made while learners were interacting and on the basis of that information she plans her future reinforcement or remedial lessons.

7.9 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we made you aware of the need to formally include Spoken English in the language curriculum. We also distinguished between the features of spoken and written English. We emphasized the importance of group work in teaching the spoken skill and suggested some of the features of an effective oral skills lesson. Finally we described the role of the teacher in sustaining and enlivening an oral skills class. We hope you found this unit useful.

7.10 KEY WORDS

cue cards	cards given to learners in a role play game to tell them which role they are to play, and what they are to do (Cue Cards are sometimes called role cards)
fluency	being able to use a language spontaneously and confidently, without lots of pauses and hesitations.
motor perceptive skills	the skill of perceiving and producing the sounds and structure of a language
interaction skill	deciding what to say, when to say it and how to say it.
reciprocity of speech	the need to adapt speech according to the listener's responses
feedback	information given about the result of someone's actions to the person responsible

7.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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