

# Techniques for Developing Speaking Skills and Fluency

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*In the changing global scenario, English has become the storehouse of knowledge and the medium of establishing communication across the world. Acquiring English language skills is the prerequisite for every individual who intends to be a part of the changing global scenario. As a result, the process of teaching and learning English has focused on the development of four language skills—LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). The aim of this paper is to explain some of the techniques for developing speaking skills and improving language fluency. The techniques can be used in the higher education pedagogy and in the training institutions where the focus is laid on employability skills and placements.*

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**E**merging trends in industry and higher education have opened new avenues to the Indian professionals to groom themselves to suit the job scenario. But these trends have also raised their concerns about the quality of the workforce available. The IT boom and the process of globalization have opened up numerous doors to the success and career development of the young generation. With the establishment of multinational companies in India, the focus is on the oral communication skills besides the correct use of English language at the workplace. As English has become a medium of global communication, proficiency in English language has become the prerequisite for securing a job in the multinational companies. But there are many still lagging behind because of lack of proficiency in English.

Recognizing the importance of English language to the success of every individual is the need of the hour. During the last 15 years, the economic juggernaut cast away the shackles of rigid state control allowing the service sector to take off in a big way. The corporate world and the multinational companies brought with them a ground swell of demand for English language proficiency. In the public sector, economic and education policy makers have come out with the idea that provision of good English language is one of the cheapest tool of equitable economic growth. The

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linguist, David Graddol (2000) predicts that by 2015, a certain level of English competence will become a common minimum requirement in employment across the globe.

“People are our greatest asset” is the *mantra* of the corporate sector. The human resource management has become a foremost department where focus is laid on the competence of an individual. But only a few corporate companies have started putting human resource management system in place that supports this philosophy. As Chiamsiri *et al.* (2005) put forward their views that there are a number of challenges in the Indian service industry which require the attention of HR managers to find the right candidate and build conducive environment which will be beneficial to the employees as well as to the organization.

As a matter of fact, the responsibility of making employable candidates ready for the industry is that of educational system. During the last 20 years, much focus was laid on developing English language competence. In the changing scenario, English has become the storehouse of knowledge and the medium of establishing communication across the world. In this context, acquiring English language skills is the prerequisite for every individual who intends to be the part of the changing global scenario. As a result, the process of teaching and learning English has focused on the development of four language skills—LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). The aim of this paper is to explain some of the techniques for developing speaking skills and improving language fluency. The techniques can be used in the higher education pedagogy and in the training institutions where the focus is laid on employability skills and placements.

Different techniques can be adopted for developing speaking skills. Teachers can work as facilitators while students become the active participants. Acquiring skills means to adopt the required skill sets and use the same with certain standard. The facilitator’s job is very important in the process of instruction. The facilitator can create an encouraging atmosphere in the language classroom so that each student will contribute to the process.

A facilitator should aim at providing suitable situation for the effective learning and should encourage students to speak in the correct language with proficiency. Valdes and Fiqueroa (1994) define language proficiency as “...what it means to know a language goes beyond simplistic views of good pronunciation, ‘correct’ grammar, and even mastery of rules of politeness, knowing a language and knowing how to use a language involves a mastery and control of a large number of interdependent components and elements that interact with one another and that are affected by the nature of the situation in which communication takes place” (p. 34). Before we deal with the techniques, it is necessary to mention that the students possess minimum level of understanding and ability to speak English language. More specifically the students are expected to have the knowledge of grammar, structure, an expected range of vocabulary and the capacity to use English effectively in different situations.

As it is observed in the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU) study material for Post Graduate Certificate in the Teaching of English (PGCTE) that communicative language teaching suggests two approaches to the development of oral communication skills:

1. Learning Language in the classroom as a skill; and
2. Developing Spoken skills through exposure and use.

No skill can be acquired unless we exercise it and the oral skill is not an exception for this. Learners have to make some attempts to hone the skills, irrespective of the mistakes they commit in the course of communication. The mistakes committed can be rectified and corrected at any stage later but they should first be encouraged to open up and actively participate in the classroom activities for developing their oral communication skills.

Teachers adopt different techniques in language classroom. Based on general observations of teaching and learning process they can be grouped into certain modes. A few modes often used in the language classroom can be tapped as techniques for developing the oral communication skills:

- Solo Mode: Self-introductions, one-minute sessions, giving running commentary, reading newspaper loudly, making/giving presentations, etc.
- Interactive Mode: Giving directions, asking questions, role-plays, simulation, situational dialogues, etc.
- Group Mode: Debate, group discussions, etc.

### **Self, Introduction**

It is very difficult to have a productive conversation with people when you don't know what the other people involved in conversation are responsible for or what they are trying to achieve. Hence you will have to introduce yourself and listen to many others doing, many people appear reluctant and nervous about such situations.

Self-introduction is a language activity which can be conducted in the classroom to hone the necessary skills of the students. Projecting self with all the possible capacity and potential that one possesses, has become the need of the hour. To begin with, we can ask students to introduce themselves by telling their name, academic excellence, their hobbies, interests, etc. It will give them a personal touch and at the same time improve their involvement and performance in the activity.

When a group of people meet, it is necessary to have an acquaintance with one another; the most effective way in this situation is introducing one another at once. Once we are convinced about the need of self-introduction, it becomes much easier. It becomes a procedure rather than a strange situation where we are unsure of what to say. In the introductory sessions, learners can focus on their academic excellence they have achieved. They can also state about the strength and specialization and some other important skills they possess.

This activity gives a lot of confidence to the participants and at the same time a constant exposure of such situation will help improving this area. The most difficult situation arises when the candidates are in a fix for the lack of skill during job interviews. Usually the process needs self-introduction of each candidate at least once. With a little preparation and practice, the candidate can master the art of self-introduction with ease and highlight credentials for the job.

Notes on self-introduction during interviews:

- Try and make your introduction positive and enthusiastic.
- Try and appear friendly and approachable.
- Speak clearly and loudly. Mumbling and whispering should be avoided.
- If your work or hobbies could be perceived as controversial you may need to put a different spin on your introduction. Generally, interests in controversial politics, e.g., religion, communism and fascism, terrorism, fundamentalism, guns, and bombs should be avoided.

### **One-Minute Sessions**

One-minute sessions can be organized and conducted to encourage students to actively participate in the language activity so that they get some exposure to their own ideas, thoughts and observations. A few minor topics can be suggested; as a result we will get a positive response from the other end. Participation in this activity for a number of times gives the learners enough exposure to improve their language skills; they learn to be precise and apt.

One-minute sessions can be impromptu or prepared or both. In case of the prepared topics, we may get a proper response and better performance of the participants. In this language activity, participants get exposure for developing speaking skills and they also perk up their stage courage.

### **Asking Questions**

Asking questions is a natural feature of communication, but one of the most important tools which teachers have at their disposal. Questioning is crucial to the way teachers manage the class, engage students with content, encourage participation and increase understanding. Typically, teachers ask a number of questions everyday. However, the quality and value of questions varies. While questioning can be an effective tool, there is both an art and science in asking questions.

Every question demands a response (except in the case of requests and suggestions), so that questions inevitably generate communication. However the quantity of questions asked needs to be considered in relation to general time constraints and the need to keep teacher talking time to a minimum while maximizing learners' contribution.

There are pitfalls such as over eliciting when the learners have little collective knowledge, and bombarding students with questions of little relevance or importance. The questions ‘Do you understand?’, ‘Is that clear?’ and ‘OK?’ are unlikely to provoke a helpful response. It is also wise to avoid questions which may cause embarrassment or which may offend through sarcasm (Are you awake?).

Thompson (1997) notices that a little training is given in asking questions, and it is rarely mentioned in general ELT texts, teachers are left to develop the technique by themselves, and are often unaware of how effective their questions are. The teacher’s questions are therefore a useful focus for peer observation and feedback on a lesson—awareness raising exercises for teachers themselves.

### **Effective Questioning**

With respect to the teacher’s talking time, it is not the quantity but the quality and value of questions that is important. Steve Darn and Funda Cetin suggest teachers a few things while questioning students in the class:

- Decide on the purpose of questions.
- Minimize the use of “yes/no” questions except when checking meaning and understanding or encouraging weaker students.
- Ask a balance of referential and display questions.
- Use open-ended (divergent) questions to encourage opinions, elaboration and discussion.
- Ask questions about important rather than trivial content.
- Grade language in questions and try not to over paraphrase.
- Personalize questions where possible.
- Avoid questions that contain the answer.
- Make sure that students clearly understand questions.
- Spread questions randomly around the class.
- Balance questions to the whole class with individual student nomination.
- Give enough time for students to answer.
- Anticipate students’ responses.
- Give appropriate responses to questions particularly where correction is required and in order to extend the dialogue.

### **Giving Directions**

Giving directions is one of the techniques that can be adopted in the language classroom to develop the language ability of the learners. In this activity, the learners

come to know how to reply to the person asking for certain direction. The learner has to assume himself as if he needs to go to a particular place or towards the direction. With that assumption, the direction should be given to the person so that she will reach the destination. This activity demands a variety of vocabulary related to the geographical details, names, etc. Almost everyone of us comes across this kind of situation when we have to give direction. So this language activity proves to be as a tool to improve the learners' oral skills.

### **Giving Running Commentary**

It is a real test of the speaker when somebody tries to give the running commentary of a live event. It needs an excellent command over the language and a wide range of suitable and appropriate vocabulary. It also demands sound knowledge with the specific terminology of the event of which the speaker tries to give a running commentary.

This language development activity can be given to the students in the class provided with an audio-video system having a recorded sports event. The learners will watch the event and try to give a running commentary. If possible, record the voice of the speaker and later on check the accuracy of the commentator.

### **Reading Newspaper Loudly**

Reading a newspaper looks as only an activity to hone reading skills. But if it is done loudly, it will be more helpful to the learners to improve their oral skills also. Reading a newspaper improves one's knowledge of the current affairs and the acquaintance with the world. Reading loudly gives an opportunity to the student to pronounce different words in English, at the same time it tests learner's reading skills as well. This activity has to be done in the class and the teacher should see that everyone gets a chance to do it.

### **Role-Play and Simulation**

Role-playing or simulation is an extremely valuable method for language learners. It encourages thinking and creativity of the learners and give them an opportunity to develop and practice new language and behavioral skills in a relatively non-threatening setting, and can create motivation and involvement necessary for learning.

Role-play is one of the effective English language teaching techniques. It is often discussed along with 'simulation'. Though both seem the same, there is a difference between the two techniques. As put by Ladousse (1987) simulation is a broader concept, which is complex, lengthy, and relatively inflexible; while role-play is quite simple, brief and flexible. According to Scarcella and Oxford (1992) simulations simulate real life situations but role-play is an activity where the participants represent and experience some character type known in everyday life. Simulation is a situation in which the students play a natural role, i.e., a role that they sometimes have in real life (e.g., buying groceries or booking a hotel). In a role-play, the students play a part they do not play

in real life (e.g., Prime Minister, managing director of an MNC or a famous singer). Ladousse (1987) supports this idea; he writes that simulations always include an element of role play. Thus, in a role-play, participants assign roles which they act out within scenario. In a simulation, emphasis is on the interaction between one role with the other roles, rather than on acting out individual roles. However, the terms ‘simulation’, ‘game’, ‘role-play’, ‘simulation game’, ‘role-play simulation’, and ‘role-playing game’ are often used interchangeably in role-play and simulation techniques.

### **Situational Dialogues**

English like any other language has both spoken and written forms. The spoken form consists of two main aspects:

1. Conversation – dealing with content;
2. Pronunciation – dealing with phonetics and the sound system.

To master native like speaking skills, one has to develop these two aspects. Situational dialogues help learners build their speaking skills in English by providing an opportunity to develop structurally correct yet functional English. It provides conversational cues from a stock of useful expressions such as clichés of conversation, frequently used expressions, greetings, rejoinders, etc. The learners should be able to produce these learnt isolated expressions in new situations and in new combinations during real life conversation. The language of dialogues can be natural, appropriate, and sufficiently redundant so that it gives plenty of scope for practice of conversational English both in formal and informal situations.

The facilitator can give different types of situations to the students and make them active in the language class room. There are many situations that we encounter in day-to-day life. We need to establish a communication for:

Request, expressing hesitation or intrusion, expressing purpose, asking and expressing opinions, expressing surprise, amazement, astonishment, wonder, tendering apology or regretting, seeking permission, expressing gratitude, agreement and disagreement, etc.

### **Debate**

Debate or debating is a formal method of interaction and representation of arguments. Rules governing debate allow groups and individuals to discuss and decide issues and differences. The aspect of argument in debate is distinct from logical argument, which encompasses aspects of human persuasion, and appeals to emotional responses.

Informal debate is a common occurrence, but the quality and depth of a debate improves knowledge and skill of its participants as debaters. Deliberative bodies such as parliaments, legislative assemblies, and meetings of all sorts engage in debates. The outcome of a debate may be decided by audience vote, by judges, or by a combination of the two. Formal debates between candidates for elected office,

such as the leader's debates and the US presidential election debates are common in democracies.

### **Group Discussion Skills**

Apart from various other skills Group Discussion (GD) is the most prominent expertise that requires heed. It is also a test of the teacher or facilitator who has to encourage the group to optimize the active participation of each member of the group. GD has become a necessary tool to judge the personality and the capacity of thinking of an individual. Nowadays, almost all the multinational companies conduct GD that serves to test the ability of positive and critical thinking of the candidate and simultaneously they test the proficiency in English. Just like other skills, an employer can evaluate the knowledge, confidence and leadership skills of the candidates through GD.

The group discussion skills can also be mastered by obliging certain rules and regulations. The ultimate aim of all the contestants is to express their notions in a systematic way and help others to contribute their share. A useful strategy for developing an effective dynamic group discussion is to identify task and maintain roles that members can take up during the GD:

- Initiator
- Information seeker
- Information giver
- Procedure facilitator
- Opinion seeker
- Opinion giver
- Clarifier, and
- Summarizer

Each member of the group should be mentally prepared for performing the above roles. It gives them an opportunity to get involved in the group activity and prove their talent, leadership qualities, proficiency of English and so on.

In addition to the above a contestant should observe some guidelines to make his/her own performance better. In order to make GD more effective, Bhattacharya (2008) has proposed the following guidelines. If a participant could follow these guidelines, then there is an acute chance to hit the bull's eye:

- Team building
- Reasoning ability
- Leadership skills
- Flexibility



- Assertiveness
- Creativity, and
- Listening ability

Over and above all these efforts, a participant should get involved in the process of brain storming. Once a participant comes to know about the topic, s/he should prepare for and should try mind mapping, i.e., thinking about the topic by considering all the possible aspects of it. If a participant could ask the following questions about the topic, it will certainly give him an insight and inputs in depth. These points could be useful to the participants during the GD.

The participants can also prepare the topic with the help of all the Wh-words which will be definitely fruitful. It gives all possible critical aspects to the ideas and thoughts of an individual (when, where, why, who, whom, whose, which, how, how much, how long, how many).

Asking such questions to yourself about the topic categorically gives a proper line of thought that can be helpful during the GD and based on all these assets a participant can impress the observer.

## **Language Fluency**

The term 'fluency' relates to language production and it is normally reserved for speech. It is the ability to link units of speech together with facility and without strain or in appropriate slowness, or undue hesitation. Faerch *et al.* (1984, p. 168) include fluency as a component of communication competence and distinguish it from strategies of competence in this way:

Whereas, strategies competence presupposes lack of (accessible) knowledge, fluency covers speakers' ability to make use of whatever linguistic and pragmatic competence they have.

They listed three types of fluency:

1. Semantic fluency: Linking together propositions and speech acts.
2. Lexical-syntactic fluency: Linking together syntactic constitutes and words.
3. Articulator fluency: Linking together speech segments.

A learner has to communicate in English whenever, wherever possible. Fluency does not mean speed. As stated in the types of fluency mentioned above, learners' goal should be to achieve all these. It is not possible, unless a learner does it with some deliberate involvement in the process of communication. Thinking in English deliberately can also be one of the techniques to improve the fluency of English.

Teaching and learning is generally termed a process and each process needs a period of time to complete the cycle. Acquiring English speaking skills is also one

of the processes that demands a period of time. While teaching and learning oral skills in the language classroom, we adopt some methods and techniques. The conventional methods of language teaching and learning are the only tools where the teachers support learners to know about the language but do not support them to enhance their fluency.

No classroom training, E-learning, audiovisuals, language laboratories can make an individual proficient and fluent in any language. Ultimately, it is up to the learner to put into action and follow the self-directed, self-study method. This will reduce his dependability on others and on the facilities like laboratory, software, etc. As it is noted earlier, a teacher can help learners only with accuracy but he/she cannot help to improve their fluency. As the ideas, thoughts, feeling come out spontaneously and naturally, we should be able to use the target language effectively and fluently.

To become a proficient speaker, the integrated efforts of an individual are required with consistency and dedication. Learners can form a forum of a group of like-minded people who positively think about developing language skills. Such an effort will give exposure to English language and the deliberations of the forum would bring them success.

There can be many routes to reach a destination and the choice of the route may depend on various factors like the traveler, time, and so on. Teaching speaking skills can be achieved through one or a combination of above techniques discussed. Language education as such lacks rigor and is slow paced. It is based on the premise that language is a process of acquisition spread over a period of time. This does not suit the present pedagogy which is time bound. Moreover the specific needs should be well-planned and focused to yield observable results. Language instructors should be flexible while adopting the techniques to suit the learner according to the aspect of language that needs to be improved. Hence, there is a need for a change in the approach to language teaching which will focus on the immediate requirements of the workplace and activate the passive knowledge of English for real time performance. ☉

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