

1. What is speaking?

If you have learned a language other than your own, which of the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, or writing—did you find to be the hardest? Many people feel that speaking in a new language is harder than reading, writing, or listening for two reasons. First, unlike reading or writing, speaking happens in *real time*: usually the person you are talking to is waiting for you to speak right then. Second, when you speak, you cannot edit and revise what you wish to say, as you can if you are writing.

In language teaching, the four skills are described in terms of their direction. Language generated by the learner (in speech or writing) is referred to as **productive**. Language directed at the learner (in reading or listening) is called **receptive**. Another important idea is the **channel**, which refers to the medium of the message (aural/oral or written). Thus, speaking is the productive aural/oral skill. It consists of producing systematic verbal **utterances** to convey meaning.

Teaching speaking is sometimes considered a simple process. Commercial language schools around the world hire people with no training to teach conversation. Although speaking is totally natural, speaking in a language other than our own is anything but simple.

Spoken language and written language differ in many significant ways. Here are some key contrasts (van Lier, 1995, p. 88):

| Spoken language | Written language |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| Auditory | Visual |
| Temporary; immediate reception | Permanent; delayed reception |
| Prosody (rhythm, stress intonation) | Punctuation |
| Immediate feedback | Delayed or no feedback |
| Planning and editing limited by channel | Unlimited planning, editing, revision |

Given these differences between writing and speech, you can see why people who learn a foreign language largely from textbooks often sound bookish when they speak.

2. Background to teaching speaking

For many years people taught speaking by having students repeat sentences and recite memorized textbook dialogues. **Audiolingual** repetition drills were designed to familiarize students with the sounds and structural patterns of the **target language** (the language which learners are aiming to learn). People supposedly learned to speak by practicing grammatical structures and then later using them in conversation. So an audiolingual speaking lesson might involve an interaction like Example 1. *T* stands for teacher and *S* represents a particular student. *Ss* stands for students. (Textbook lines are in quotation marks.)

Example

T: Repeat please: "Good morning, Maria."

Ss: "Good morning, Maria."

T: "Where are you going?"

Ss: "Where are you going?"

T: Good. "I'm going to the library."

Ss: "I going to library."

T: Listen: "I'm going to **THE** library."

Ss: "I going to **THE** library."

T: Listen again. "Li-BRA-ry." Rrr. "Librrrary."

Ss: "Librrrary."

T: "To the library."

Ss: "To the library."

T: "Going to the library."

Ss: "Going to the library."

T: "I'm going to the library."

Ss: "I going to the library."

T: Good! Now the next part.

The concept of habit formation, of **behaviorism**, is the theoretical basis of the audiolingual method. Since learners needed to form good habits, lessons involved a great deal of repetition. Students were not supposed to form bad habits, so teachers treated spoken errors quickly. Teachers worried that if errors were left untreated, the students might learn those erroneous forms.

For many years, teaching speaking involved providing students with the components of the language, in hopes that they would eventually put them

all together and speak. So students might spend several semesters repeating after the teacher, studying grammar rules, reciting dialogues, and learning vocabulary. Unfortunately, actual conversations didn't sound like the textbook dialogues, and if you really met someone like Maria, she was seldom going to the library.

Action

Find a dialogue in an ESL/EFL or foreign language textbook. Ask someone who speaks that language well to see if people might have actually had that conversation. Does the language sound natural? If not, why not?

During the late twentieth century, language acquisition research made us reconsider some long-standing beliefs about how people learn to speak. Several studies led to the conclusion that we had gotten the basic idea backwards: People don't learn the pieces of the language and then put them together to make conversations. Instead, infants acquiring their first language and people acquiring second languages learn the pieces by interacting with other people.

This realization has several interesting implications. If we believe that people learn languages by interacting, then learners should interact during lessons. As a result, a method called **communicative language teaching** arose. Two versions of communicative language teaching emerged. The weak version says teachers should teach the components of language but include communication activities. The strong version says since students learn through interacting, lessons should consist of opportunities to communicate in the target language. In this method, teachers often downplay accuracy and emphasize how students communicate when they speak the target language.

However, in order to communicate well in another language, we must make ourselves understood by the people we are speaking with, and this is not an easy task—especially at the beginning and intermediate levels. There is some need to be accurate in speaking the target language. This is tricky because, as we saw in the speaking-writing contrast, there is limited time for planning and editing speech during conversations. And for less-than-proficient speakers, managing the components of language that must work together when we speak is very demanding indeed.

Figure 1 on page 51 depicts the many linguistic elements involved in speaking. The left column lists four areas of linguistic analysis, but it is the center column which concerns us as teachers. It labels the units of spoken language.

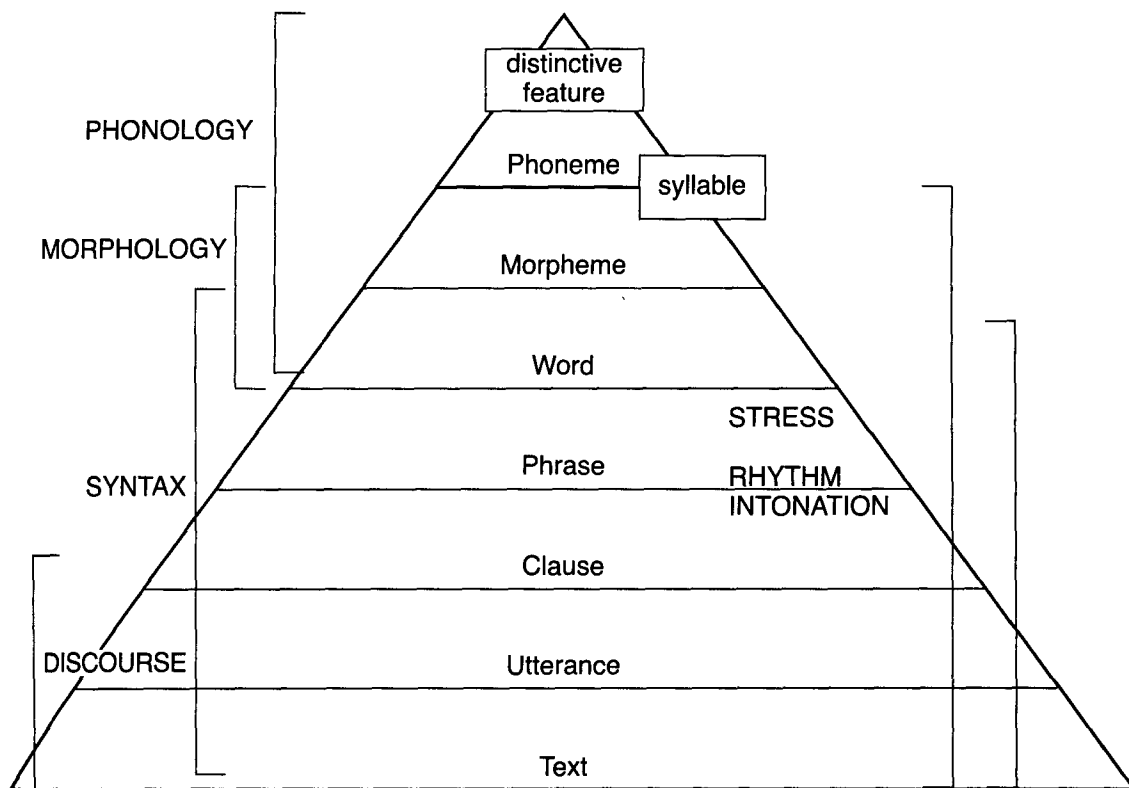


Figure 1: *Interaction in the Language Curriculum: Awareness, Autonomy, and Authenticity* (Longman, 1996)

Beginning at the pyramid's base, text means stretches of language of an undetermined length. Spoken texts are composed of utterances. An utterance is something someone says. It may not be a full sentence, as the concept is used in writing. For example, in asking a friend about what to eat, you might ask, "Would you like pizza?" This utterance is a fully formed grammatical sentence. But if you are both thinking about what to eat, you might just ask your friend, "Pizza?" Although this is not a grammatical sentence, it is an utterance.

Action

Eavesdrop on two people having a conversation. Do they use complete sentences or are their turns composed of shorter utterances? Share your answer with your classmates.

The next two levels, **clauses** and **phrases**, are often confused. A phrase is two or more words which function as a unit but don't have a subject or a verb marked for tense. These include prepositional phrases (*to the store or after breakfast*) and infinitive phrases (*to eat or to look up*). Clauses are two or more words that do contain a verb marked for tense. These may be full sentences (*John ate the cake.*) or something less than a full sentence (*While John was eating the cake...*). Such clauses and phrases don't usually appear alone in formal writing, but they are quite common in speech. Both clauses and phrases can be utterances, as can words, the next level in the pyramid.

A word is called a free **morpheme**—a unit of language which can stand on its own and have meaning (*hat, flee, already, etc.*). There are also bound morphemes, which are always connected to words. These include prefixes, such as *un-* or *pre-*, as well as suffixes, such as *-tion* or *-s* or *-ed*. Sometimes during the pressure of speaking, it is difficult for English learners to use the necessary suffixes—especially if words in their own language don't usually end in consonants.

Action

Identify the free and bound morphemes in this list:

ski jumpers inappropriately dysfunctional nonrefundable

The top levels of the pyramid on page 51 deal with the sound system of the language. Pronunciation is covered elsewhere (Murphy, Chapter 6, this volume), so only a few related issues will be mentioned here.

In Figure 1, the word *syllable* overlaps the levels of morphemes and **phonemes**. A phoneme is a unit of sound in a language that distinguishes meaning. Phonemes can be either consonants (like /p/ or /b/ in the words *pit* and *bit*) or vowels (like /i/ and /æ/ in *bit* and *bat*).

Action

Think of five pairs of words where the phonemic distinctions are consonants (as in *pit* and *bit*). Now think of five pairs where the phonemic difference is based on vowel sounds (as in *bit* and *bat*).

Consonants and vowels are **segmental** phonemes. Sometimes a spoken syllable consists of one phoneme (/o/ in *okay*). But syllables also consist of combined sounds (the second syllable of *okay*), and of both free and bound morphemes. For instance, the free morpheme *hat* consists of three phonemes but only one syllable. The word *disheartened* has three syllables, four morphemes (*dis + heart + en + ed*), and eight phonemes.

An even smaller unit, a **distinctive feature**, relates to how or where a sound is produced when we speak. The distinctive feature which makes /b/ and /p/ separate phonemes in English is voicing: when /b/ is pronounced the vocal cords are vibrating, but when /p/ is pronounced, the vocal cords are not vibrating. These minute contrasts contribute to a speaker's accent. (One of my Arabic-speaking students who didn't distinguish between /b/ and /p/ told me he'd had "green bee soup" for lunch!)

On the right side of the pyramid there are three other labels. Stress, rhythm, and intonation are called the **suprasegmental** phonemes, because when we speak, they carry meaning differences but they operate "above" the segmental phonemes. To illustrate that the suprasegmental phonemes carry meaning, consider the sentence, "I think I know." It can convey four different meanings, depending on the stress:

I think I know. I think *I* know. I *think* I know. I think I *know*.

In these four utterances, the bold italic typeface shows which word is stressed. If you say these sentences aloud, you will hear the sound and meaning differences among them. The differences are related to the context where the utterances occur. Consider these interpretations:

I think I know. (You may not think I know the answer, but I'm pretty sure I do.)

I *think* I know. (I'm not entirely sure, but I think I know the answer.)

I think *I* know. (You may not know the answer, but I think I do.)

I think I *know*. (I am not unsure—I am quite confident that I know the answer.)

Ask a friend to explain the difference in meanings in the following utterances:

- It **was** Jane who missed the bus.
- It was Jane who **missed** the bus.
- It was **Jane** who missed the bus.
- It was Jane who missed the **bus**.

See if your friend's interpretations match your predictions.

Now that we have reached the top of the pyramid, you can see that all the levels of language operate when we speak, and conversation is not really simple at all. It is important for language teachers to understand these units of language and how they work together. Given this background information, we will now consider five principles for teaching speaking.

3. Principles for teaching speaking

1. Be aware of the differences between second language and foreign language learning contexts.

Speaking is learned in two broad contexts: foreign language and second language situations. The challenges you face as a teacher are determined partly by the target language context.

A **foreign language (FL) context** is one where the target language is not the language of communication in the society (e.g., learning English in Japan or studying French in Australia). Learning speaking skills is very challenging for students in FL contexts, because they have very few opportunities to use the target language outside the classroom. Sometimes foreign language learners traveling in countries where their target languages are spoken find that they can neither understand native speakers nor be understood. There is an old story of the college freshman who struggled with introductory French and then with intermediate French. When he finally passed that course, his parents were so proud they sent him on a trip to Paris. When he got to Paris, he discovered that no one there speaks or understands intermediate French!

A **second language (SL) context** is one where the target language is the language of communication in the society (such as English in the UK or Spanish in Mexico). Second language learners include refugees, international students, and immigrants. Some second language learners (especially those who arrive in their new country as children) achieve notable speaking skills, but many others progress to a certain proficiency level and then go no further. Their speech seems to stop developing at a point where it still contains noticeable, patterned errors. These can be errors in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or any combination of problems that affect the learners' ability to communicate by speaking.

Reflection



Do you have experience learning a foreign language and then trying to use it with people who speak that language natively? Or have you learned a new language when you moved to a new country? If so, did you have any problems making yourself understood? What problems did you have? (If you had no problems, ask some friends with different backgrounds.)

2. Give students practice with both fluency and accuracy.

Accuracy is the extent to which students' speech matches what people actually say when they use the target language. **Fluency** is the extent to which speakers use the language quickly and confidently, with few hesitations or unnatural pauses, false starts, word searches, etc.

In language lessons—especially at the beginning and intermediate levels—learners must be given opportunities to develop both their fluency and their accuracy. They cannot develop fluency if the teacher is constantly interrupting them to correct their oral errors. Teachers must provide students with fluency-building practice and realize that making mistakes is a natural part of learning a new language.

Reflection



Think about when you have tried to learn a new language. How did you develop your fluency? How did you develop your accuracy? Think of an effective strategy for helping learners developing fluency and one for developing accuracy.

3. Provide opportunities for students to talk by using group work or pair work, and limiting teacher talk.

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that teachers do approximately 50 to 80 percent of the talking in classrooms. It is important for us as language teachers to be aware of how much we are talking in class so we don't take up all the time the students could be talking.

Pair work and group work activities can be used to increase the amount of time that learners get to speak in the target language during lessons. One further interesting point is that when the teacher is removed from the conversation, the learners take on diverse speaking roles that are normally filled by the teacher (such as posing questions or offering clarification).

4. Plan speaking tasks that involve negotiation for meaning.

Research suggests that learners make progress by communicating in the target language because interaction necessarily involves trying to understand and make yourself understood. This process is called **negotiating for meaning**. It involves checking to see if you've understood what someone has said, clarifying your understanding, and confirming that someone has understood your meaning. By asking for clarification, repetition, or explanations during conversations, learners get the people they are speaking with to address them with language at a level they can learn from and understand.

5. Design classroom activities that involve guidance and practice in both transactional and interactional speaking.

When we talk with someone outside the classroom, we usually do so for interactional or transactional purposes. **Interactional speech** is communicating with someone for social purposes. It includes both establishing and maintaining social relationships. **Transactional speech** involves communicating to get something done, including the exchange of goods and/or services.

Most spoken interactions “can be placed on a continuum from relatively predictable to relatively unpredictable” (Nunan, 1991, p. 42). Conversations are relatively unpredictable and can range over many topics, with the participants taking turns and commenting freely. In contrast, Nunan states that “transactional encounters of a fairly restricted kind will usually contain highly predictable patterns” (1991, p. 42), and he gives the example of telephoning for a taxi. According to Nunan, interactional speech is much more fluid and unpredictable than transactional speech. Speaking activities inside the classroom need to embody both interactional and transactional purposes, since language learners will have to speak the target language in both transactional and interactional settings.

4. Classroom techniques and tasks

Information gap is a useful activity in which one person has information that the other lacks. They must use the target language to share that information. For instance, one student has the directions to a party and must give them to a classmate.

Jigsaw activities are a bidirectional or multidirectional information gap. Each person in a pair or group has some information the other persons need. For example, one student could have a timetable for train travel in Canada. Another could have a map of Canada. Without showing each other the visual information, they must speak English to plan a one-week trip.

Many information gap and jigsaw activities can be done with simple props, such as coins. First, make sure each student in a class has a penny, a quarter, a nickel, and dime (or the coins of your country). Next, hide your coins so the students can't see what you are doing. The students then follow your instructions as you do the actions you are describing: “Place the quarter with the man's picture facing up. Put the penny on the quarter. Put the dime below the quarter but not touching it. Put the nickel next to the dime on the right.” Finally, reveal the design you have made with your coins so the students can see if their patterns match yours.

Action

Action

In the teacher-led version of this task, the students are primarily listening. But you can have them do the activity in pairs, where they take turns speaking. One natural information gap task—especially if the students don't know each other well—is to have one learner describe his family to another, while his partner draws a family tree diagram and labels it with names and information about the speaker's family. This activity promotes a great deal of negotiation for meaning, as one student asks another, "Wait—who lives in Madrid? Your aunt or, how you say, your cousin?"

You can have the students use **tango seating** to work in pairs. In tango seating one student's right shoulder is next to the other student's right shoulder and they are facing opposite directions. This arrangement allows them to hear one another but not see what is being drawn or constructed on their partner's desk.

Action Try an information gap activity with tango seating. Using simple objects, give a friend instructions about how to arrange the items as you are doing the same thing with yours. (You and your partner must have identical sets of objects.) When you have finished, compare the results.

Role-plays are also excellent activities for speaking in the relatively safe environment of the classroom. In a **role-play**, students are given particular roles in the target language. For example, one student plays a tourist telephoning the police to report his wallet stolen. The other plays the role of a police officer trying to help the tourist file a report. Role-plays give learners practice speaking the target language before they must do so in a real environment.

Simulations are more elaborate than role-plays. In a **simulation**, props and documents provide a somewhat realistic environment for language practice. So for instance, in a language lesson about the grocery store, a teacher might bring in "products" for the students to buy (a box of crackers, coffee, a jar of jam) and even play money for making their purchases. A check-out counter would be set up for the students to practice transactional speaking with the cashier.

Action Plan a role-play activity for a language lesson. The task should involve two people (for instance, a tourist and a waiter in a café). Write brief instructions on index cards. Try the role-play with a friend.