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# IMPROVING STUDENTS' SPEAKING SKILLS IN AN EFL CONTEXT




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**Abstract:** Learning a foreign language is acquiring, developing and improving a number of skills, and in this context learning English as a foreign language is no different. Among the skills that need to be mastered are reading, writing, listening and speaking. It goes without saying that one set of skills is not more important than another, however, it is safe to conclude that the ultimate aim of learning any foreign language is to facilitate communication. In this sense, we can say that speaking skills are often equated with communication skills, which, up to a certain extent, is true. Yet, it is important that we bear in mind the fact that communication is not solely identified with speaking, since communication can also include writing, listening, and up to a point, reading as well. Another important point that should be considered when discussing the acquisition, development and improvement of foreign language skills is that of instruction, learning, and feedback. The aim of this presentation is to provide some insight into how EFL students can improve their speaking skills in an EFL context, as well as the possibility of incorporating communicative grammar in practice, and the pedagogical implications in English language teaching.

**Key Word:** speaking skills, strategies, techniques, communication (skills)



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## 1. Improving Students' Speaking Skills in an EFL Context

Learning a foreign language, any foreign language, has to do with acquiring, developing, and improving a number of skills, such as, given in no particular order, reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills, broadly and generally speaking, of course. It goes without saying that the ultimate aim of learning a foreign language is to facilitate communication, and as such, spoken language production is often considered to be one of the most challenging aspects of learning a foreign language. There are certainly a number of factors that are involved as regards how easy or challenging it is to acquire and improve a set of skills in learning a foreign language, and what seems easy for one person might be challenging for another, and vice versa. We cannot claim with definite certainty that one set of skills is more important than another, or that one set of skills is more challenging to acquire than another.

What we can claim with certainty, however, is that it is important that all skills are mastered in order to meet the ultimate aim of facilitating communication. It goes without saying, however, that speaking skills are generally viewed by learners, in the majority of instances, students, as the most complex to master, although, certainly not impossible.

Undoubtedly, many learners may find it challenging to express themselves in spoken language in the target language (12), whether the target language is English or some other foreign language. Several factors may be at play as regards affecting learners' speaking skills, and it is important that they are taken into consideration, since only then will they be appropriately addressed and dealt with. Some factors that may affect learners' acquisition, development, and improvement of speaking skills may be:

- learners' age;
- learners' proficiency;
- group size;
- resources/teaching staff available;
- learners' needs/motivation.

In terms of the learners' age, we can generally summarize that younger speakers are less inhibited when it comes to expressing themselves orally, despite the fact that they may lack life experience, and as such may be limited to a given specter of discussion topics, whereas older, more mature learners tend to show greater reluctance and inhibition when it comes to oral communication. This can be attributed to the fact that although, generally speaking, older learners are more dedicated to learning the grammar rules of the foreign language, they tend to display apprehension when it comes time to communicate as they do not want to make a mistake. Younger learners, on the other hand, have no such inhibitions - although they may be less dedicated in terms of learning the grammar rules of the foreign language, they display no anxiety when it comes to expressing themselves orally. Interestingly enough, they seem to thrive on using the foreign language for oral communication, and in most instances, it is their favorite activity.

As regards the learners' proficiency, undoubtedly, the more proficient the learners, the easier it will be for them to speak the foreign language, and thus, to achieve spoken communication. This is where speaking skills go hand in hand with reading skills, and reading comprehension, as the more learners read in the foreign language, the bigger word stock they will have, and the better intuition they will have for acceptable and unacceptable constructions in the target language. Reading also improves learners' fluency, and in the long term, it improves their ease in communicating in the foreign language. This is in fact, a perfect example of the complementarity of the various skills in acquiring and improving one's foreign language knowledge. Reading skills also result in learners' increased cultural awareness, which is another important aspect when learning a foreign language.

As to the factors of group size and resources/teaching staff available, these are more or less out of the realm of the learners' power to control. Undoubtedly, if the group size is too large, the learners might not all get a chance to speak, or might not all get a chance to speak very much. Furthermore, those who are more extroverted and not so shy might get more opportunities to express themselves orally at the expense of those who are more inhibited and introverted, as the lat-

ter just might get lost in the shuffle. On the other hand, too small a group may also lead to problems as it will not allow a diversity of opinions to be expressed, and may also make various speaking activities undoable, such as debates and discussions. In this sense, then, it is important that the group size is balanced and not too large, and not too small, either. The other factor mentioned, that of resources/teaching staff available, is also out of the realm of the learners' control, and it is connected to the group size - the more teaching staff available, the more balanced the groups will be in terms of size.

The last factor mentioned above, learners' needs/motivation, is probably the most influential concerning the success of the learners in acquiring, developing, and improving their foreign language speaking skills. It goes without saying that when learners are motivated, success cannot be far behind, and that is true in this case as well. Learners are motivated when they have strictly defined and determined needs, and they are focused on meeting those needs. The instructor/teacher also has a significant role here, especially in increasing learners' motivation, and this can be done firstly by being aware of the learners' different needs, and then, secondly, in working to address those needs. This can be done by choosing appropriate speaking activities which will interest the learners and motivate them to participate as much as possible, as well as dealing with and adapting to the existing conditions as regards group size, and resources/teaching staff available.

Undoubtedly, when dealing with helping learners acquire and develop speaking skills, there are some factors that need to be taken into consideration, which may affect oral communication. It goes without saying that learning to speak a foreign language requires more than knowing its grammatical and semantic rules, and that the objective in any language classroom is to get the learners to use the target language, which is done best when they are actively involved in the learning process. However, we also need to be aware of the following factors which may appear as a hurdle to foreign language students:

- learner inhibition/lack of confidence/anxiety;
- lack of motivation;

- lack of vocabulary;
- lack of listening skills;
- L1 interference.

The factor of learner inhibition/lack of confidence/anxiety in reference to hindering learners' acquisition, development, and improvement of speaking skills in the target language are ultimately influenced by the learners themselves, although the instructor/teacher most definitely has a significant role in alleviating the said states and facilitating the communication process. Learner inhibition may occur due to a number of reasons, among which we can mention the learners' age; generally speaking, it tends not be an issue among younger learners, who seem to have no problems with self-confidence when expressing themselves orally in the target language. Older, more mature learners, on the other hand, tend to shy away, at first, from speaking in the foreign language, most frequently because they do not want to make mistakes, which are inevitable. The good news is that confidence, like any other skill, can be developed and improved over time, as long as there is an encouraging and friendly atmosphere during the learning process. Over time, and with practice, the learners' confidence will grow, and their level of anxiety will decrease, or disappear altogether.

JSHS|53

The factor concerning motivation is ultimately dependent on the learners of the foreign language, although the instructor/teacher also plays a vital role in terms of whether the learners' motivation will increase or decrease. There are learners, of course, who are intrinsically motivated, and will work hard to achieve their ultimate aim of being able to communicate in the target language. However, in the majority of cases, it is up to the instructor/teacher to take the lead and motivate their learners, as much as possible, using various techniques and strategies they have at their disposal, and help learners improve their speaking skills. Ultimately, it is a joint effort learner-teacher in the learning process, and the final result is simply a reflection of how successful that effort was. It goes without saying that threats (tests, marks, etc.), and bribery (candy, etc.) are not the right approach to increasing motivation, but rather providing a pleasant working atmosphere, and choosing the age/group appropriate activi-

ties and topics. Getting learners motivated, and keeping them motivated, is a challenging, yet rewarding task.

In terms of the learners' vocabulary, or lack thereof, this is where we can say that reading skills are so important in helping improve speaking skills. In other words, the more learners read in the target language, the more they will increase their word stock in the said language, the more fluent they will become, the better their intuition will become as regards various phrases, collocations, constructions, etc., the better they will be able to express themselves in the target language, thus resulting in decreased anxiety and inhibition, and increased confidence, ultimately resulting in increased motivation. We see the chain effect of all of these factors, how they are linked one to the other, and it all starts with (improved) reading skills. This is just one example of how all the skills are interconnected when we talk about acquiring, developing and improving one's knowledge of a given foreign language.

Another set of skills that plays a significant role in improving learners' speaking skills is the set of listening skills - namely, we cannot work on improving learners' speaking skills without working on their listening skills at the same time - it is a two-way street. Often, listening skills are seen as not as important as speaking skills, and this is a situation that needs to be rectified and overcome as the two sets of skills are partners and go hand in hand. There are different strategies, techniques, and activities that can be employed to improve learners' listening skills, and ultimately facilitate their oral communication abilities.

And, finally, there is the factor of L1 interference that may appear as a hurdle in learners' attempts to acquire, develop, and improve their foreign language speaking skills. Namely, this factor, like the others mentioned previously, does not stand alone on its own, but rather it is connected to other factors, and dealt with accordingly. Generally speaking, the issue of L1 (mother tongue) interference appears in lower proficiency groups, where there is a lack of vocabulary, where the learners use their L1 as a crutch to help them communicate something in the target language. This is something that can be overcome with time, as the learners' proficiency in the target language in-



creases, as their word stock expands, and as they gain confidence in expressing themselves in the L2. One thing that should be particularly stressed here is the importance of sticking to L2 use at all times during the foreign language instruction, and limiting the use of L1 as much as possible.

Of course, the above-mentioned factors may or may not be present, and certainly not all at the same time, however, as long as we are aware of what hurdles may appear, we can be prepared and not be caught off-guard should they make an appearance. As was mentioned previously, it is important to remember that it is a joint effort, learner - instructor/teacher, and the more effort both parties put into it, the greater the results will be.

There are different strategies and techniques that may be employed in developing and improving (EFL) students' speaking skills, such as:

- reducing teacher talking time (TTT);
- increasing student talking time (STT);
- achieving a balance between speaking and listening;
- avoiding yes/no questions;
- employing multiple learning methods;
- raising students' awareness that mistakes are an inevitable part of learning;
- stressing the importance of the integral role of correction.

The first two points go hand-in-hand, and are, for the most part, self-explanatory. Namely, the teacher has the role of facilitator, and it is important that as the learners' proficiency increases, the teacher talking time (TTT) is reduced, and conversely, the student talking time (STT) is increased so as to allow learners as much as possible the opportunity to practice their speaking skills. Previously we mentioned the importance of developing listening skills in order to facilitate learners' speaking skills, i.e. the importance of achieving a balance between speaking and listening. In this way, learners see first-hand that all set of skills are important, and are complementary to each other. Another way of increasing learners' opportunities to

practice their speaking skills is by employing open-ended questions, and, in effect, limiting the use of, and even avoiding yes/no questions, which do not add much to practicing speaking. Just as it is important to deal with all set of skills when learning a foreign language, it is also important to employ multiple learning methods. Different learners have different learning styles, have different needs, their motivation is different, as is their knowledge and proficiency in the given foreign language. By employing multiple learning methods, there is a greater chance of successfully meeting the said differences that are present. The last two points, raising students' awareness that mistakes are an inevitable part of learning, and stressing the importance of the integral role of correction are of significant meaning since learners need to be made aware that mistakes will be made, but that that is a positive and expected aspect of foreign language learning. The important thing is not that mistakes are made, but rather, how they are dealt with, both by the learner and by the teacher. In terms of assessing speaking skills, and in our case, assessing speaking skills in EFL, there are detailed criteria (band scores/descriptors) that are used to objectively assess students' speaking skills, such as grammatical competence (range and accuracy); vocabulary (lexis); pronunciation; discourse management (fluency and coherence; cohesion), and interactive communication (initiate, develop, respond). This is something that learners should be made aware of in order to feel comfortable when the issue of correction comes into play.

The points above only graze the surface regarding the different strategies and techniques that exist, and that may be made use of in order to facilitate the development and improvement of (EFL) students' speaking skills.

In line with the importance of acquiring, developing, and improving speaking skills in an EFL context, a survey was conducted among 72 third-year EFL students at the Department of English Language and Literature, at the "Blaze Koneski" Faculty of Philology, to gain an insight into their opinions as regards what they feel is the most important aspect for them to acquire and improve on as regards learning a foreign language, and in their case, learning English as a foreign language. The results received showed no great surprises, although there were some unexpected answers along the way.

One of the questions on the survey was the following: What skill (reading, writing, listening, speaking), if any, do you think is the most important to learn when studying EFL? Only 10% of the respondents felt that all of the skills were important, while the majority, 62% of the respondents, set speaking skills as the most important. 19 % felt that the most important were writing skills, and only 5% and 4% declared these to be reading and listening skills, respectively.

Other questions that appeared on the survey were the following: what is the most difficult skill to be assessed (why); how can students' speaking skills be improved; what would be the most comfortable environment for doing speaking activities - pair work, group work, class work, etc. Interestingly, the respondents felt the most difficult skill to be assessed was speaking, closely followed by writing; in terms of improving speaking skills - they felt the speaking activities needed to be 'interesting' in order to motivate them; whereas in terms of the environment they felt most comfortable to practice their speaking skills - the results were close as regards pair work and group work, eventually followed up by class work, such as debates and discussions.

## 2. Conclusion

In conclusion, speaking skills are often seen as the most important to master when it comes to learning a foreign language, and they are generally perceived as the most complex and difficult to master, as well as the trickiest to evaluate. Learning a foreign language = to facilitate communication, and in this sense speaking skills = communication skills. Speaking skills can be evaluated objectively, within a given set of parameters, by using various band scores that provide an accurate description of students' speaking proficiency. Foreign language acquisition is a joint effort (learner + teacher), and as such, constructive feedback is crucial in the learning process.

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