SKILLS · SPEAKING

TEACHING SPEAKING

Speaking competence, sub-skills and how to teach them

AT A GLANCE

What it involves	knowledge of language and discourse, core speaking skills and communication strategies
Teaching speaking means	developing these through instruction, practice and feedback, not just giving learners time to talk
Plan it with	the **Task-Based Learning – Speaking** and **Task–Teach–Task – Speaking** frameworks
Lesson ideas	the **Speaking sub-skills menu** in the appendix

Why speaking is challenging

Learners often see speaking as the most important skill: being "good at English" usually means being able to hold a conversation fluently, accurately and with clear pronunciation. It is also the skill many find hardest. They mention gaps in grammar, not finding the right words in time, pauses and hesitations, pronunciation, and understanding the other speaker.

Much of this difficulty comes from the nature of speech itself.

	Speaking	Writing
Time	happens in real time, with little time to plan	there is time to plan, draft and edit
Interaction	usually two-way: you listen and speak at the same time	usually one writer, with the reader absent
Language	chunks, short clauses linked by *and* or *but*, ellipsis, fillers	full sentences, more complex structures
Mistakes	heard immediately and repaired on the spot	can be corrected before anyone reads them
Support	intonation, gesture and a shared context help	words on the page do all the work

Speaking also serves different purposes. **Transactional** talk is about getting things done or exchanging information (booking a room, giving directions). **Interactional** talk is about building and maintaining relationships (chatting with a colleague, small talk). Both need practice, and they draw on different sub-skills.

Speaking competence

Goh and Burns (2012) describe speaking competence as three connected areas. A balanced speaking course develops all three.

KNOWLEDGE OF LANGUAGE AND DISCOURSE	CORE SPEAKING SKILLS	COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES
Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, plus knowledge of how spoken genres are structured and the social norms of speaking. **e.g.** narrative tenses, word stress, how a phone call usually unfolds	Pronunciation, speech functions, managing interaction and organising longer turns. **e.g.** making a request, taking turns, telling an anecdote	Ways of keeping communication going, getting help and planning or monitoring your own speech. **e.g.** paraphrasing, asking for repetition, planning what to say

Adapted from Goh & Burns (2012: 53)

Communication strategies are valuable, especially at lower levels, because they help learners cope with gaps in their language and keep a conversation going. But they are only one of the three areas. A speaking lesson that only practises strategies, or only pre-teaches vocabulary, leaves out much of what learners need.

Accuracy, fluency and complexity

Accuracy	producing correct grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation
Fluency	speaking smoothly in real time, without unnecessary pauses or breakdowns
Complexity	using a wider range of more elaborate language

Learners rarely improve all three at once, so plan for each. **Planning time** before a task tends to help complexity and fluency, **repeating** a task helps all three, and **feedback** after the task helps accuracy. See the **Task-Based Language Teaching** handout for more.

The sub-skills at a glance

Each area of speaking competence can be broken down into **sub-skills** you can teach. They can be grouped in different ways; the table below shows one useful grouping. The appendix lists a range of sub-skills, each with a classroom activity idea.

Area	What it covers	For example
Accuracy and complexity	grammar, vocabulary and building detailed sentences	choosing precise vocabulary
Pronunciation	sounds, stress, linking and intonation	linking words smoothly
Fluency	pace, pausing and fluent use of common chunks	avoiding unnecessary hesitation
Interaction	managing a conversation with others	taking turns, showing you're listening
Discourse organisation	structuring longer turns, such as stories, explanations and arguments	linking and ordering ideas
Appropriacy	speech functions, formality and social and cultural norms	adjusting formality to the situation
Communication strategies	keeping going, asking for help and checking, planning and monitoring	paraphrasing, asking for repetition

Teaching speaking, not just doing speaking

A speaking lesson is not just a chance to "do some speaking". Learners need **input**, **practice** and **feedback** on the sub-skills a task requires. Goh and Burns's **teaching-speaking cycle** shows how. The eltMate **Task-Based Learning – Speaking** framework follows the same logic.

Teaching-speaking cycle (Goh & Burns 2012)	TBL – Speaking framework
1 Focus learners' attention on speaking	**Lead-in**
2 Provide input and/or guide planning	**Noticing; Task preparation**
3 Conduct speaking tasks	**Speaking task**
4 Focus on language, skills and strategies	**Language focus**
5 Repeat speaking tasks	**Task repetition**
6 Direct learners' reflection on learning	**Language focus and Task repetition (reflection questions)**
7 Facilitate feedback on learning	**Language focus and Task repetition (feedback)**

Choosing a sub-skill focus

A useful speaking lesson combines the sub-skills the task really needs. To choose them:

- **Start from the task.** What will learners have to do to achieve the outcome?
- **Imagine a proficient speaker** doing the task. What language, skills and strategies would they use?
- **Consider your learners.** What can they already do? A Task–Teach–Task lesson can show you.
- **Choose one or two main sub-skills** as your aim, and treat others as secondary aims or later lessons.
- **Balance the areas over a course,** so learners don't always practise the same kind of sub-skill.

Here is how this might look for a role-play in a restaurant.

Area	Possible focus	Activity
Appropriacy	polite requests (*Could I have…? I'd like…*)	rank expressions from least to most polite
Interaction	opening and closing an exchange with a waiter	complete the missing turns in a model dialogue
Pronunciation	polite intonation in requests	say *Could I have the bill?* in a flat and a friendly way
Communication strategies	asking for repetition and clarification	role-play a busy, noisy restaurant
Accuracy and complexity	food vocabulary	prepare a menu before the role-play

Food vocabulary alone wouldn't prepare learners for this situation. In this lesson, the main aim might be polite requests and asking for repetition, with intonation as a supporting aim.

> **TEACHING TIP**
> Keep a simple record of the sub-skills you have focused on across a course. It makes it easy to spot gaps, for example lots of work on interaction but none on longer turns.

Speaking tasks

A well-designed task gives learners a real reason to speak: a clear outcome, a need to produce language, interaction, and some unpredictability. Discussion questions or a scripted role-play on their own often don't produce the speaking you want. For task criteria and task types with examples, see the **Practice Activities** handout.

Feedback and reflection

Feedback on speaking should cover more than errors. Comment on **communicative effectiveness** (did learners achieve the outcome?), on the **sub-skills** you focused on, and on **language**, and always include positive feedback. For techniques, see the **Error Correction** handout.

Recordings are a powerful tool: learners can listen back, notice their own errors and hear their progress between the first and second attempts. Make sure everyone agrees and feels comfortable being recorded.

Encourage learners to **reflect** after a task with a simple checklist.

SELF-ASSESSMENT CHECKLIST (EXAMPLE)

- ☐ I achieved the outcome of the task.
- ☐ I used some of the expressions we looked at.
- ☐ I kept going when I didn't know a word.
- ☐ I asked for help or repetition when I needed it.
- ☐ I spoke more smoothly the second time.

Common pitfalls

Pitfall	What to do instead
The lesson is just a set of discussion questions.	Plan a sub-skill focus, a clear outcome and feedback.
Input is limited to topic vocabulary.	Combine the sub-skills the task really needs.
Every lesson practises the same kind of sub-skill.	Balance the areas across a course.
Learners speak with no time to prepare.	Give planning time, especially for longer turns.
Feedback only covers errors.	Include communicative effectiveness, the target sub-skills and positive feedback.
The teacher does most of the talking.	Use pairs and groups to maximise learner talking time.

ONLINE CLASSES

Use breakout rooms for pair and group speaking, and give a clear outcome before learners leave the main room. Online calls make some sub-skills harder, such as turn-taking and reading body language, so they are worth practising explicitly. Recording is easy online, which makes self-assessment simple.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Teaching speaking means instruction, practice and feedback, not just speaking time.
- Speaking competence combines knowledge of language and discourse, core speaking skills and communication strategies.
- Communication strategies matter, but they are one area among several.
- Choose one or two sub-skills the task really needs, and balance the areas over a course.
- Use planning time, task repetition and varied feedback to develop accuracy, fluency and complexity.

WHERE NEXT

Task-Based Learning – Speaking (framework) planning a speaking lesson

Task–Teach–Task – Speaking (framework) a speaking lesson that responds to learners' needs

Task-Based Language Teaching (methodology) the approach behind both frameworks

Practice Activities task criteria and task types

Error Correction feedback techniques

Classroom Management maximising learner talking time

Further reading

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Bygate, M. (1987). *Speaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching* (4th ed.). Harlow: Pearson Longman. Chapter 20.

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Richards, J.C. (2008). *Teaching Listening and Speaking: From Theory to Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to Teach Speaking*. Harlow: Pearson Longman.

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Ur, P. (2012). *A Course in English Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 9.

Appendix · Speaking sub-skills menu

Use this menu to choose a sub-skill focus for a lesson and to find an activity idea. Each activity can be adapted to almost any topic or task.

Accuracy and complexity

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Using grammar accurately	Delayed correction: board five sentences learners said during the task, and groups correct them.
Choosing precise vocabulary	"Upgrade it": learners replace general words (*nice, good, thing*) in a partner's anecdote with more precise ones.
Forming words correctly	Complete a word-family grid (*decide, decision, decisive*) before a discussion.
Using collocations and idioms appropriately	Find five collocations in a model dialogue, then use at least three in the task.
Building complex, detailed sentences	"Add a detail": partners extend each other's sentences with *because, which* or *although*.

Pronunciation

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Pronouncing individual sounds accurately	Minimal-pairs bingo (*ship / sheep, live / leave*).
Stressing the right syllables and words	Contrastive stress: *I said TUESday, not THURSday.* Learners correct each other's "mistakes".
Linking words smoothly	Shadowing: learners speak along with a short recording, copying its rhythm and linking.
Using intonation to convey meaning	Say *Really?* with different intonation; your partner guesses how you feel.

Fluency

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Speaking at a natural pace	4-3-2: tell the same story to three partners in four, three and then two minutes.
Avoiding unnecessary pauses and hesitations	"Just a minute": talk about a familiar topic for 60 seconds without stopping.
Pausing in meaningful places	Mark the pauses (chunks) in a short transcript, then read it aloud.
Using common expressions fluently	Learn five useful chunks for the task (*The thing is..., To be honest...*) and use them.

Interaction

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Starting, maintaining and ending a conversation	Mingle: have three short conversations, opening and closing each one differently.
Taking turns and interrupting politely	Talk tokens: each learner has three tokens and must use them all during a discussion.
Showing you're listening and responding	Listeners must react (*Really? No way! That's great!*) before the speaker can continue.
Building on what others say	"Yes, and…": each contribution must start by picking up the previous speaker's idea.
Changing the topic smoothly	Learners draw a new topic card mid-conversation and move to it naturally (*By the way…, That reminds me…*).

Discourse organisation

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Opening, developing and closing a long turn	Label the parts of a recorded anecdote (opening, background, events, ending), then plan your own.
Linking and ordering ideas clearly	Retell a picture story using discourse marker cards (*first, then, after that, in the end*).
Telling extended stories or giving arguments	Mini-debate: groups prepare and present two arguments with examples, then respond to the other side.

Appropriacy

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Using set phrases for everyday functions	Sort expressions by function (requesting, offering, advising), then use them in a role-play.
Adjusting formality to the situation	Make the same request to a friend and to a manager; rank expressions from most to least formal.
Matching cultural and social expectations	Compare how people give and accept compliments or refuse invitations in learners' cultures.
Responding appropriately to implied meanings and hints	"What do they really mean?": short dialogues with hints (*It's a bit cold in here…*) and suitable responses.

Communication strategies · Keeping going

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Paraphrasing when you don't know a word	Taboo-style game: describe a word without saying it.
Using an approximate or alternative word	"It's a kind of…": describe unusual objects using general words.

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Using fillers to buy thinking time	Answer difficult questions, starting each answer with a filler (*Well, let me think…*).
Giving the main point before the details	"Headline first": state your main point in one sentence, then add details.
Giving examples to clarify meaning	"For instance": support every opinion in a discussion with an example.
Repeating to gain time or emphasise a point	Echo the question before answering (*My favourite place? Hmm…*).
Using gesture and body language	Describe objects using words and gestures only, without naming them.

Communication strategies · Asking for help and checking

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Checking the listener understands you	Information gap: speakers must check understanding at least twice (*Do you see what I mean?*).
Confirming you understand the listener	Phone dictation: the listener repeats key details back to confirm them.
Asking for clarification or repetition	Noisy line: one partner speaks very quietly, so the other has to ask for repetition.
Asking for an example or help with a word	Describe pictures and ask for help with missing words (*What do you call…?*).

Communication strategies · Planning and monitoring

Sub-skill	Activity idea
Planning what to say and how	Give planning time with a simple note frame before the task.
Noticing and correcting your own errors	Learners record the task, transcribe one minute and correct it.
Evaluating your own performance	Learners complete a self-assessment checklist after repeating the task.

Ideas from: Goh & Burns (2012); Thornbury (2005)