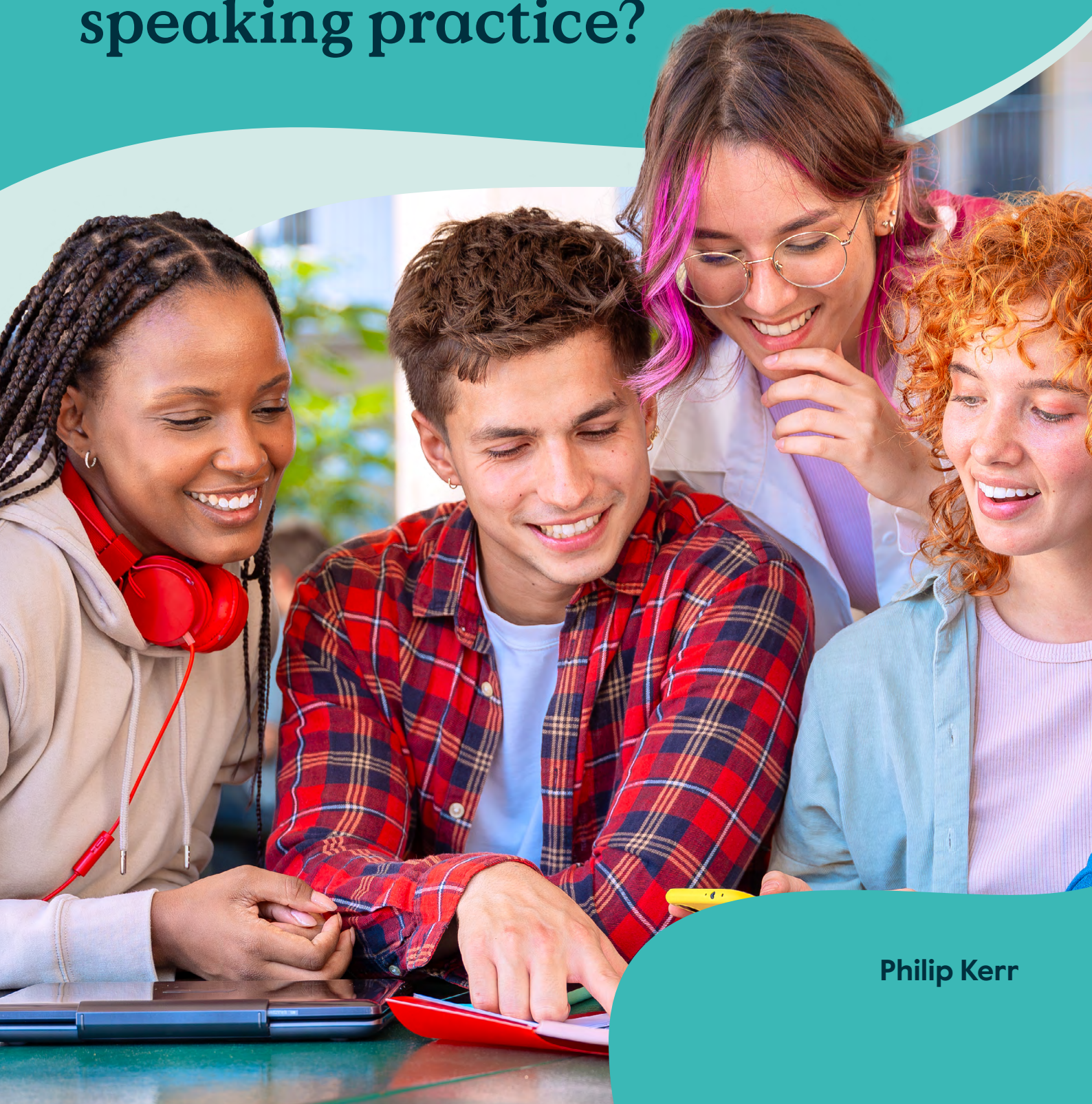
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How much time should we give to speaking practice?



Philip Kerr



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Introduction

Many, if not most, English language teachers are sympathetic to the principles of communicative language teaching, and their teaching includes activities that could be described as 'communicative'. Despite the fact that there are many different interpretations of the term 'communicative approach' (Thornbury, 2016), there is general agreement that learners will benefit from participating in fluency-based, meaningful, communicative speaking activities (Bygate, 2009: 426; Dörnyei, 2009: 34). Researchers do not agree on the precise mechanisms through which communicative competence develops in communicative speaking tasks, but most conclude that such tasks are necessary for the development of automatized language knowledge, or spoken fluency. As Thornbury (2005: 79) puts it, oral 'practice makes – if not perfect – at least, fluent'.

This paper begins by considering the amount of time that may be desirable for communicative tasks before looking at the practical questions of how this time may be best used.



Time for speaking in the curriculum

Researchers and methodologists are reluctant to specify exactly what proportion of an English language course should be devoted to communicative speaking tasks because of the wide variation in teaching and learning contexts. However, the consensus is that there should be a lot. Nation and Newton (2009: 1–2) suggest that a course should be divided into four broad strands[1], each of which is given approximately equal time. These are:

1. meaning-focused input (i.e. reading and listening);
2. meaning-focused output (i.e. speaking and writing);
3. language-focused learning (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation);
4. fluency development of previously studied items of language through the four skills.

This suggests that approximately 25 percent of classroom time should be devoted to communicative speaking tasks. If time can be devoted outside the classroom to Nation and Newton's first and third strands (as is the case, for example, in flipped and blended approaches), the amount of time for speaking in the classroom could be significantly increased.

There are, however, probably very few classrooms around the world where learners have anything like this amount of time to spend on fluency-based speaking activities (e.g. Karavas-Dokas, 1996; Orafi & Borg, 2009; Mowlaie & Rahimi, 2010). Teachers often feel under pressure to prepare their students for examinations where language knowledge is more important than communicative competence (e.g. Gorsuch, 2000). As a result, some focus almost exclusively on Nation and Newton's third strand. At the same time, teachers who are using coursebooks are invariably under pressure of time to cover the material in these books. Because speaking activities tend to occur at the end of coursebook lessons or units, they are often cut or abbreviated. Many teachers, because of their training and issues with classroom management, may well feel more comfortable with the more traditional teacher role of teaching new language than they do with the management of communicative tasks. If, in addition, many learners also find communicative speaking the hardest classroom task to perform, it is not surprising to see such activities neglected.

The reasons for the limited amount of time devoted to speaking may be understandable, but the result is regrettable. As noted above, most contemporary coursebooks include opportunities for extended speaking at the end of lessons or units. However, the way that coursebook lessons are ordered on the page does not reflect the way that they are planned and written (see Fig. 1). Writers will typically have a very clear idea of the final speaking activity before they work out the preceding activities that feed into the final speaking task.

Without opportunities to re-use and interconnect the language they have studied, learners' knowledge *about* language may never become the ability to *use* it.

1 To read more about these four areas, see 'What do successful language learners and their teachers do?', another paper in the Cambridge Papers in English Language Education series.

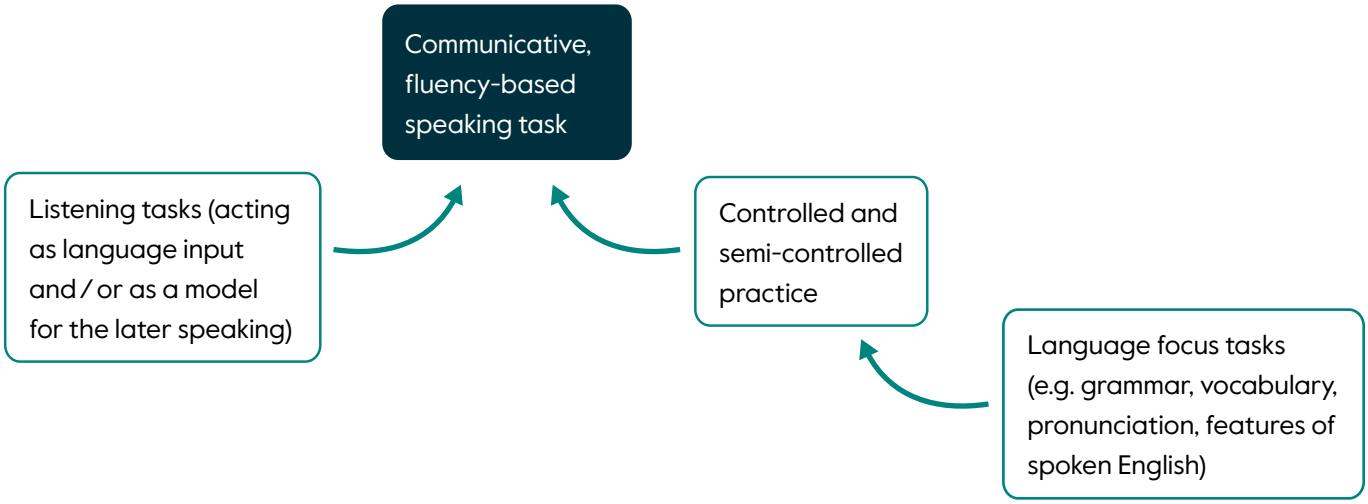


Figure 1: Typical coursebook structure

In other words, it is the final communicative task that drives, in part, the selection of everything else in a lesson or unit of work. This task serves a number of functions. It represents the intended communicative outcome of everything that has come before. As well as the part it plays in developing fluency, it is an opportunity for learners to discover what they can *do* with the language they have been studying and practising. It allows for the possibility that learners can 'retrieve and interrelate a great deal of what they have [previously] encountered' (Rivers, 1987: 5). Without opportunities to re-use and interconnect the language they have studied, learners' knowledge *about* language may never become the ability to *use* it. It is also an opportunity for teachers to discover what their students can do and so can inform their decisions about what kinds of language focus tasks and listening input may be useful or appropriate as a *follow-up* to the speaking.

Without the communicative task, the probability of language learning taking place is much diminished.

The task should be both a motivating and diagnostic moment. If this speaking is curtailed or cut, the value of all the work leading up to it is undermined. In the paragraphs above, I have suggested that we can think about preparing students for communicative speaking tasks (where they practise the *total skill* of speaking) with a series of pre-communicative activities (where they are trained in the *part-skills* of speaking). This categorisation of classroom procedures has been common practice since the early days of communicative language teaching (Littlewood, 1981) and has led to the useful distinction between *skill-using* (communicative tasks which promote fluency) and *skill-getting* (pre-communicative activities which promote accuracy) (Rivers & Temperley, 1978). More recently, researchers have argued that the difference between skill-using and skill-getting is not as clear as it once seemed. They express considerable doubts about how, and even whether, so-called pre-communicative language-focus tasks can lead to gains in communicative competence, but there are very few reservations about the value of oral interaction in the communicative tasks themselves. Fluency and accuracy, it has been argued (Ellis & Shintani, 2014: 197), 'co-occur through or in interaction and may in fact need to do so'. Without the communicative task, the probability of language learning taking place is much diminished.

Rethinking speaking in the classroom

When speaking is the last in a series of classroom activities, it is easy for both teachers and students to see it as separate from everything that has come before and to focus primarily on the immediate challenges of the activity. From the teacher's point of view, a major challenge will be getting the students to say anything at all. Although student participation is a necessary condition for a speaking task to be effective, it is not a sufficient condition in itself. Researchers have found that learners who participate more in interactive classroom activities are not necessarily better learners (e.g. Reiss, 1985) It is not just the *quantity*, but the *quality* of learner talk that is important. More learning is likely to take place when the speaking task is fully integrated with the other activities that take place before and after. For this reason, a cyclical model for the teaching of speaking, without start or end points, is probably more useful than the linear model that teachers are more familiar with.

Goh and Burns (2012) present a model of this kind and suggest that it should inform the planning of sequences of two, three, or more lessons (see Fig. 2). The amount of time devoted to each stage of the cycle will vary from one teaching context to another, but it is important, they argue, for none of them to be rushed (Goh & Burns, 2012: 163). The net effect of this approach is to place speaking more firmly in the centre of the curriculum.

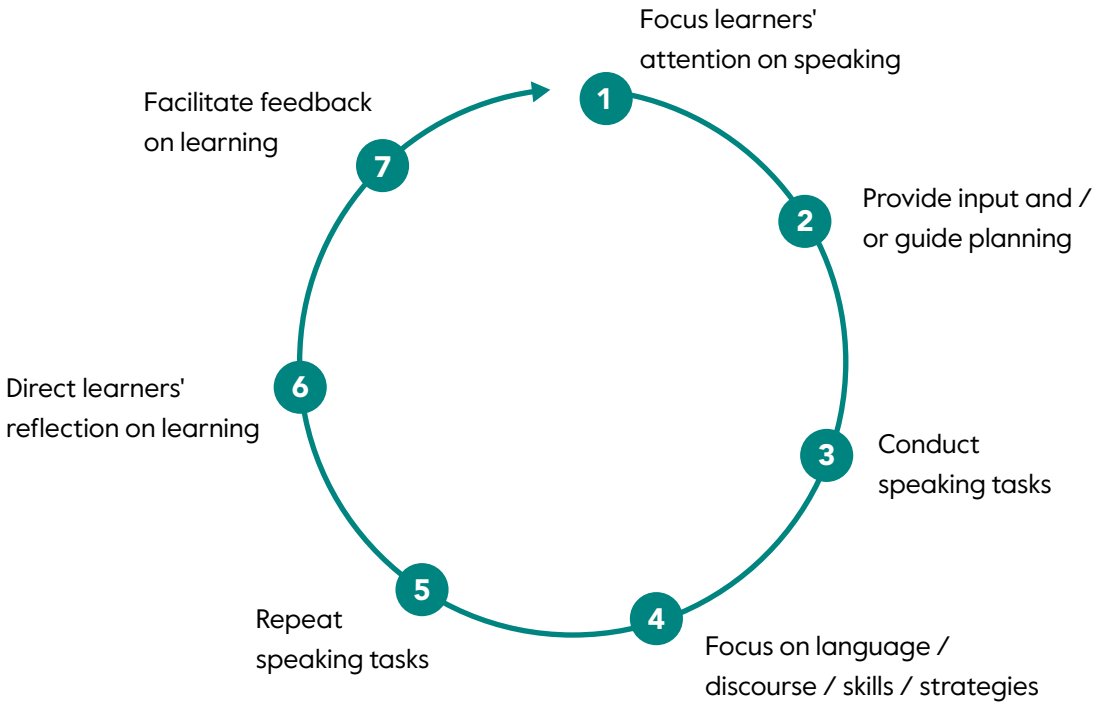


Figure 2: The teaching-speaking cycle (from Goh & Burns, 2012: 153)

Time and the management of speaking tasks

To argue that more time should be found in the curriculum for speaking tasks inevitably raises the question: how will this time be found? The answer, according to researchers, is to reduce the amount of time devoted to language-focused work. This may seem counter-intuitive to some teachers, but it is clear that (1) learners often do not learn what teachers teach anyway, and (2) they are more likely to learn when there are plenty of opportunities for oral interaction. Interaction, as Allwright put it, is the *sine qua non* of teaching (Allwright, 1984). In other words, when teachers need to cut something there is a strong case for reducing the quantity of language-focused work rather than the opportunities for speaking. Clearly, the balance needs to take into account considerations such as the need to prepare students for examinations.

More time for speaking does not necessarily mean, however, that students are simply given more time to perform the speaking task (see the 'Time limits' section below). It is more likely that time will be needed to ensure that there are opportunities for feedback (see 'Feedback on Speaking in ELT', another paper in this series) and for reflective and metacognitive activities (see the related section below). Time will also be needed for (1) learners' planning of speaking tasks and (2) opportunities for rehearsal and repetition of the tasks. It is to these two areas that we turn first.

Planning time

Speaking in another language is difficult and it has been argued that an important reason for this is that a student's attentional resources during a speaking activity are limited (Skehan, 1998: 73). They cannot give equal attention to the competing demands of thinking of something to say, getting their meaning across in real time (fluency), using language accurately and appropriately (accuracy), and using varied and more advanced language (complexity). Attempting to do so may lead some students to experience cognitive overload (Goh & Burns, 2012: 246) and anxiety as a result. In order to make the students' task more manageable, it will be necessary to 'park' one or more of these demands, so that the limited attentional resources can be appropriately directed. To some extent, all of the work that comes before a speaking activity can be seen as support and preparation for the speaking itself and should help to lessen cognitive overload. This preparatory work needs, of course, to be at the appropriate level of challenge. However, in this section, we will consider the time set aside for planning and preparation immediately before the speaking activity.



Planning time before a speaking activity may be more or less structured and may involve the following, individually or in combination:



- Giving students time to think, silently, about the task they are going to perform.
- Giving students time to make notes about what they are going to say.
- Allowing students to brainstorm ideas with another student (in English or in their own language).
- Giving students time to research (e.g. online) the topic they are going to talk about.
- Encouraging students to mentally rehearse what they are going to say.
- Giving students time to review relevant vocabulary notes or look up useful vocabulary items in a dictionary.
- Providing students with a short list of phrases that they may find useful in the task.

The techniques at the top of the list focus learners' attention on the content of what they are going to say (i.e. they are more fluency-oriented); those at the bottom focus attention more on how it will be said (i.e. they are more accuracy-oriented). There may be practical problems associated with all of these techniques. Are the students actually thinking about the task or are they thinking about something completely unrelated? Will some students attempt to write down everything they want to say and then attempt to read these notes aloud? Will some students want to spend too much time looking up items in a dictionary so they have no time to think about what to say? Will a list of useful language encourage students to think too much about ways of including that language, rather than thinking about what they want to use it for?

In addition to the practical issues discussed above, teachers may benefit from research findings into the way that different approaches to planning time impact on the learners' performance. Researchers have compared the language produced by learners in speaking tasks under different planning conditions by evaluating fluency, accuracy and complexity. Here are some of the main findings:

- Providing learners with planning time results in spoken language that is more fluent. Without planning, learners pause more often, are silent for longer periods and their language sounds less natural (Skehan, 1998: 69).
- Providing learners with planning time results in spoken language that is more complex. Without planning time, learners use a narrower vocabulary range, fewer lower frequency lexical items, a more limited range of verb forms and fewer subordinate clauses (Foster & Skehan, 1996).
- The impact of planning time on accuracy is unclear. This may be because learners prefer to spend whatever time is available thinking about the content of what they are going to say and the organisation of this content, rather than thinking about the language they will use to express it. This appears to be the case even when learners are instructed to think about the language they will need (Ellis, 2003: 33).
- Planning time *without* giving students guidance about how to use this time leads to more gains in accuracy than planning time with guidance (e.g. suggestions for ways of thinking about and organising the content) (Skehan, 1998: 70).
- Planning time is most important when the task is cognitively demanding (Ellis, 2003: 33). Cognitively demanding tasks, which require students to collaborate, are likely to be more engaging and produce more speaking than simpler tasks (see 'The value of immersive speaking activities for language learning', another paper in this series).
- Ten minutes planning time for extended interactive speaking tasks is usually sufficient to improve fluency and complexity (Nation & Newton, 2009: 117).

We cannot, of course, be sure that the research findings will be replicated with all students in all classrooms. Classrooms are very different from research laboratories in departments of applied linguistics. The desirability of providing planning time is, however, clear. In terms of the planning techniques, teachers are probably best advised to use a variety of approaches.

Repetition of tasks

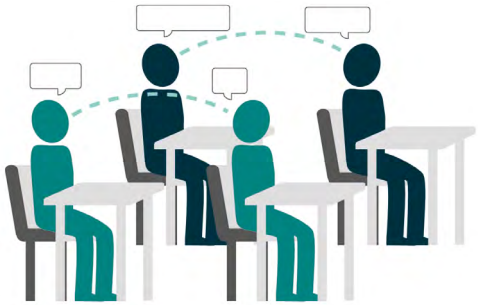
As we saw in the section above, the competing demands of speaking often require learners to trade off one demand (e.g. fluency) for another (e.g. thinking of things to say). If a task is repeated, it is more likely that one demand can be 'parked', that processing space can be freed up, and another prioritised. Research confirms that this can take place. In a repeated task, learner language has been shown to be more fluent, more complex and more accurate (in terms of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) with more self-corrections. In addition, the content of their speaking is better structured (Goh & Burns, 2012: 147–148).

In some ways, repeating a task simply makes things easier for the learner. This may be welcomed if it leads to a sense of achievement and the gains in motivation that accompany it. However, task repetition is not always easier: the focus of the challenge for the student may shift, providing opportunities for a different kind of learning. On the other hand, motivation is unlikely to be enhanced for many students unless there is some clear reason or incentive to repeat the task (Thornbury, 2005: 85). There may be occasions when it is a good idea for the teacher to explain to students the rationale for task repetition.

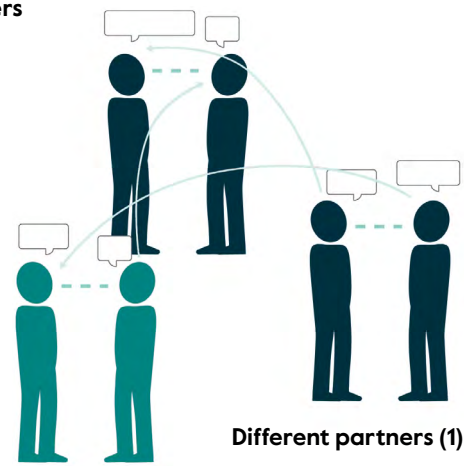
Task repetition may be organised in the following ways, individually or in combination:

Different partners

Students repeat the task with a different partner. This may just involve partnering with a student sitting behind rather than one who is sitting next to you. Alternatives include: (1) having students move around the classroom, working with a partner until, at a given signal, they must change partners; (2) the so-called 'onion technique', where students stand or sit facing each other in two concentric circles and then, at a given signal, one circle rotates so that students are facing a new partner; (3) half the class remain in their seats, half are mobile and find a new partner at a given signal.



Different partners



Different partners (1)



Different partners (2)



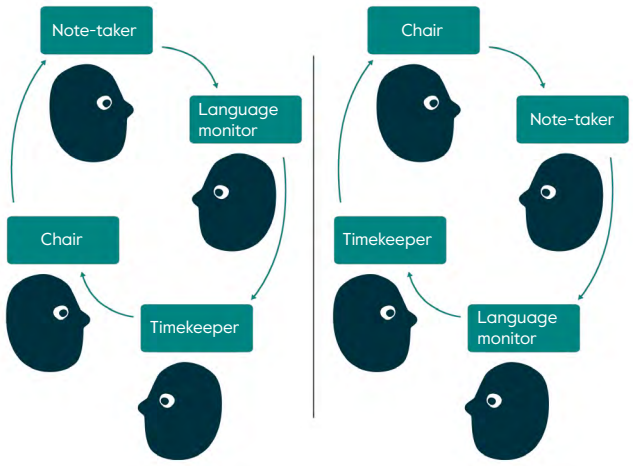
Different partners (3)

The pyramid

Students work in pairs, before repeating the task in a group of four (two pairs). On occasion, it may be possible to continue by combining two groups of four. This technique will not be possible for some task types.

Different roles

In some tasks, one member of a pair may be more of a listener than a speaker. When the task is repeated, the roles are reversed. In some tasks, individual students may be allocated specific roles, such as note-taker, language-monitor, chair or timekeeper. When the task is repeated, the allocation of these roles is changed.



Reduced time limits

Students repeat the task with a different partner, but are given less time for the repetition. In the 4/3/2 technique, students are first given four minutes. For the first repetition, this is reduced to three. For a second repetition, the time is further reduced to two minutes (Nation & Newton, 2009: 153). The precise timing allowed for each repetition may vary, depending on the nature of the task. See the 'Time limits' section below for more discussion of time limits.

Time delay

A task that was carried out early in a lesson may be repeated later in the lesson. Tasks may also be repeated in subsequent lessons.

No notes

When students have made notes in preparation for a task, they may be asked to repeat it without referring to their notes.

Additional planning time

After completing a task, students are told they will be repeating the task with a new partner. First, they are given additional silent planning time (with or without guidance).

Using the L1

The first time that a task is performed, students may be allowed, on occasion, to use their first language. One student is given the task of language monitor and makes notes about what was said in the first language. After completing the task, students discuss these notes before repeating the task using English only.

Record and repeat

Students record their speaking with audio or video. After spending time analysing their language and perhaps transcribing some sections of it, they repeat the task.

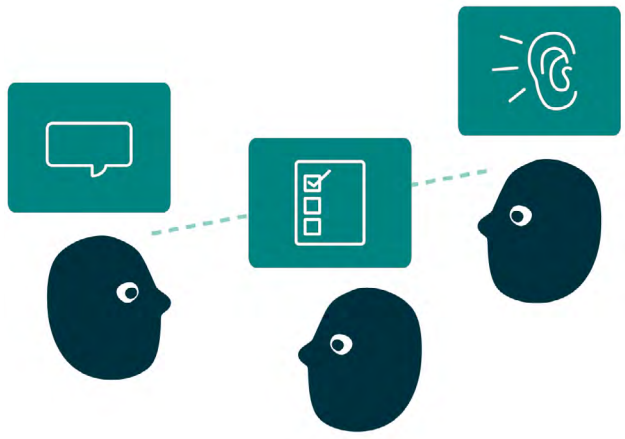
The list above does not include the commonly used technique of asking one or more pairs of students to repeat the task publicly in front of the whole class. Some students enjoy this and the technique may help the motivation of the individuals who are involved. It can, of course, have the opposite effect. In terms of language development, the 'Record and repeat' technique is likely to be both more effective and more inclusive (Hunter, 2011). Public performance does, however, allow the teacher to give feedback in a way that all the students in the class will attend to. If this takes place, feedback needs to be very sensitive, focusing more on good aspects of the students' performance than on errors. (See 'Feedback on Speaking in ELT', another white paper in this series.)

Task repetition has rich potential for developing students' fluency, complexity and accuracy, and there is a strong case for making time for it. When time is short in one lesson, repetition may be postponed until another. As with planning time, teachers are probably best advised to use a variety of techniques.

Reflective and metacognitive activities

The last suggested technique for organising task repetition in the list above requires learners to reflect on the speaking they have just done. It need not be followed by a repetition of the task. Self-evaluation work of this kind may be accompanied by worksheets that ask the students to focus on particular aspects of their speaking. These may include accuracy, fluency and complexity, but also their planning and their feelings about the task they have performed.

Goh and Burns (2012) suggest that such reflective tasks should form an important component of classroom approaches to speaking, and they provide examples of self-assessment checklists, self-observation worksheets and ideas for organising a 'speaking diary' (see Appendix). Since communicative tasks involve both speaking and listening, reflective tasks should also focus on the students' roles as listeners. Reflection on the listening experience may (1) help learners notice aspects of their own speaking performance, and (2) make them more aware of the importance of considering their audience. Learners may benefit from training in being supportive listeners. Nation and Newton (2009: 119–120) suggest one technique where students work in groups of three: one is the primary speaker, one is the listener and the third monitors, with a checklist, the degree to which the listener acted in a supportive manner. After the speaking, the three students discuss their experiences.



Activities like these can lead to improvements in performance and in learners' strategic approaches to communicative tasks, as well as enhanced motivation and self-confidence (Goh & Burns, 2012: 246). They will require time.

Time limits

In most situations where learners need to speak English, they are under time pressure. They need time to decide what to say and how to say it, to say it, to check they have got their message across, and to take remedial steps if there is any breakdown in communication (Bygate, 1987: 14). Proficient speakers can deal, more or less, with these time pressures by deploying features of spoken language that allow them more processing time. These include the use of automatized chunks of language, dropping unnecessary words (ellipsis), hesitations and repetitions, paraphrases and self-corrections. These features help people to speak fluently, but they also help learners to *learn* to speak more fluently (Bygate, 1987: 20). Learners will therefore benefit from training in the use of specific features.

The problems caused by time pressure will not, however, be alleviated by allowing students unlimited time in which to perform a task. This may lead to gains in accuracy and complexity, but this is usually at the expense of fluency (Ellis, 2003: 149–150). Fluency will also be more in focus when teachers set a time limit for communicative tasks. The greater the time pressure, the more probable it is that students will concentrate on the content of what they are saying (Skehan, 1998: 176).

The automatization of language is best promoted when students do not have the time or inclination to think too much about grammatical accuracy. Engaging tasks with non-linguistic outcomes (see 'The value of immersive speaking activities for language learning', another paper in this series), coupled with time limits, can create these conditions. Experienced teachers set time limits in order to focus students' attention on task completion, and it is usually better to underestimate than to overestimate the time that will be needed. Activities can always be briefly interrupted and a time extension can be given or negotiated. Activities can also be stopped so that students can return to planning mode for a few minutes, before returning to the task. Activities can be repeated with progressively decreasing time limits (see the discussion above of the '4/3/2 technique'). Different groups or pairs can be given different time limits. More proficient students, who require less time, can be directed towards reflective activities while the others continue with the task.

Teachers should leave plenty of time to manage communicative activities, even when using time limits. This gives the teacher the room to adapt.

Conclusion

Second language acquisition researchers agree on the importance of communicative spoken tasks for the development of language proficiency (Bygate, 2009: 426). While the development of declarative knowledge (e.g. the learning of grammar rules) is also important, it may be helpful to see this as preparation for communicative tasks, rather than seeing communicative tasks as a follow-up to the teaching of declarative knowledge. More time should be devoted to communicative speaking than is commonly the case. This time is needed for students to plan their speaking, to allow for the flexible management and repetition of tasks, for feedback and for reflective activities. The provision of more time for communicative speaking may also result in better learning because of better classroom dynamics, an improved sense of achievement and greater motivation.

Recommendations for further reading

The first book in this list is a very accessible short guide to the practicalities of managing speaking tasks. The remaining three are longer studies, which back up the practical suggestions with research evidence.

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Author biography

Philip Kerr is a teacher trainer and ELT materials writer based in Vienna, Austria. He is the author or co-author of titles in a number of coursebook series, including *Straightforward* and *Inside Out*. He is also the author of the award-winning *Translation* and *Own-Language Activities* and two ebooks, *A Short Guide to Adaptive Learning in ELT* and *How to Write Vocabulary Presentations and Practice*.

Appendix

A classroom handout on which learners can plan their future speaking skills development (from Goh & Burns 2012, p. 155).

Thinking about your experiences in learning to speak a second language

It is important that you spend some time thinking about your own learning processes. It will help you to have better control over how you learn to speak in another language. You will also gradually become less dependent on your teacher. To help you get started, here are some simple questions. Write short responses to each one.

1. When and how did you learn to speak English?
2. What is your main reason for learning to speak English?
3. What did you like most about learning to speak English? Was there anything you did not like?
4. Do you feel nervous or anxious when you speak English?
5. What kind of learning activities do you like for your speaking lessons?
6. What would you like your teachers to do to help you speak better English?
7. What do you think you can do by yourself to improve your speaking ability?
8. If you are usually quiet in class, what can you do to participate more actively?
9. How would you describe your speaking ability right now?
10. Can you list three things about your speaking that you would like to improve?

Figure 7.2: A learner's self-observation sheet on speaking development.

ENCOURAGING LEARNERS TO PLAN FOR OVERALL SPEAKING DEVELOPMENT

The learners are given different types of prompts to encourage them to think about the demands of learning to speak in a second language and how they can prepare themselves for it. This is best done at the beginning of a course or a unit of learning. Figure 7.2 is an example of a practical task that can be used to encourage learners to plan for overall speaking development at the start of a course or program. Very low-level students could be allowed to answer these questions in their native language.

The questions in Figure 7.2 can also be modified to help learners manage any negative emotions before they prepare to approach a specific speaking task.

PREPARING LEARNERS TO APPROACH A SPECIFIC SPEAKING TASK

The prompts used for this purpose focus on the speaking task that has been planned for the teaching cycle. Through responding to the prompts, learners prepare themselves by familiarizing themselves with the outcomes of the task and by considering strategies they need to complete it. The prompts can also be used to activate learners' knowledge about the demands of the task. Figure 7.3 is an example of how teachers can activate learners' prior knowledge for a speaking task in order to facilitate conceptualization and formulation in speech production (see Chapter 3 again).

A classroom handout on which learners can record their reflections on their own speaking performance (from Goh & Burns, 2012, p. 162).

Learners' reflection should be guided by different types of metacognitive knowledge, described in the methodological framework in Chapter 6 and Chapter 11. Reflection can focus on one or more of the following points:

- Demands of the speaking tasks that learners have become aware of.
- The strategies that are useful for meeting the demands of the task.
- Learners' informal assessment of their capabilities and performance.
- Areas of their performance that show improvement.
- Areas to be further improved.
- Plans for improving specific areas.

Learners could also be encouraged to draw on their experiences and to consider how they could prepare themselves for future tasks of a similar nature, whether these tasks are in the classroom or in communicative contexts outside the classroom. Figure 7.6 gives an example of the general prompts that can be used for Stage 6. These prompts can be given to learners as handouts to complete. Alternatively, they can be given to learners as headings to be used in their journals. Teachers can also encourage students

Evaluating my speaking performance	**Your teacher's / classmate's response**
1. In this week's lessons, I learned to do the following in spoken English: _____ _____ _____	
2. I also learned to use the following useful expressions that can help me speak more effectively: _____ _____ _____	
3. This is how I feel about my learning this week: a. I am confident that I can do this again. ( ) b. I am not very confident that I can do this again. ( ) c. I am still unsure about what I have to say and do in such a situation. ( ) d. I still feel anxious about speaking. ( ) e. I feel less anxious about speaking. ( )	
Put a check (√) next to the sentence that best describes how you feel right now.	

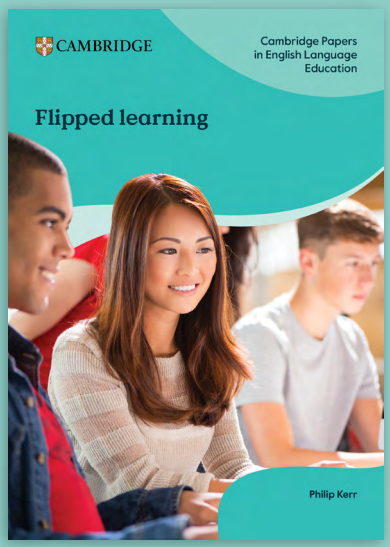
Figure 7.6: Prompts for learner reflection on learning.

Explore more

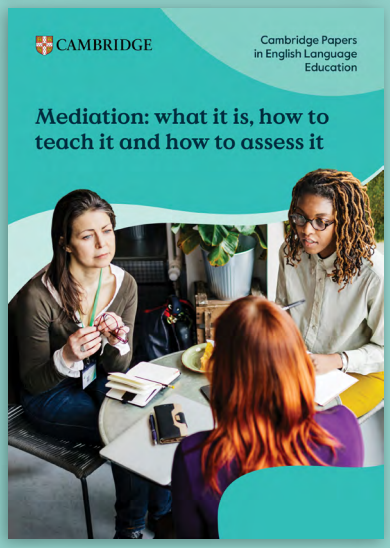
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