



Teaching Productive Skills: Speaking and Writing



Speaking and writing are the most tangible of the four language skills, and therefore offer teachers insight into the linguistic knowledge and abilities of their learners.

In this article we will look at different types of spoken and written communication along with some ideas to help ensure that your learners have the confidence to speak and write to the best of their ability.

Transactional and interactional communication

All speech and writing can be divided into two separate types: transactional and interactional. Transactional communication, as the name suggests, is goal-oriented and involves getting something done, such as buying a train ticket or asking for directions. Interactional communication, on the other hand, is purely social; its aim is to build social relations through good will and empathy. Examples of interactional communication involve small talk (typically characterised by constant shifts of topic), greetings, or giving compliments.

Many contexts will involve both types of communication; small talk will naturally include and convey information while it is common to exchange pleasantries when buying something in your local shop. Although each communication type is equally important, interactional purposes for communication are often neglected in the classroom, as the functional language typical of transactional contexts is often considered to have a higher



Differences between speaking and writing

Speaking and writing differ mostly in that speaking is time bound, that is, words and phrases are selected as they are spoken, and once they are they cannot be unspoken. Writing, on the other hand, can be, and most often is, revised and edited. This results in shorter, simpler sentences in speech, accompanied by false starts or repetition of ideas which facilitate fluency in speech. Much more than is the case in writing (although online chat is now a major form of communication), speech is often reciprocal and conversation co-constructed - the listener can respond to the speaker, either by speaking or by way of body language or facial expression, and the speaker can therefore adapt their speech to accommodate the listener.

Key considerations when planning a speaking or writing lesson

The following is a list of 5 considerations that are essential for any successful speaking or writing lesson:

1. *Provide a model*

Having a native or native-like model is a must for any productive skills lesson. A model will demonstrate what is expected of learners and act as a benchmark against which they can assess their own output. Models can easily be found online or in coursebooks, but it is also easy to create your own - you could show your students an email you have sent or record a conversation with a friend on your phone. The big decision for any teacher is at which stage to provide a model (or models); traditionally, the model would be provided at the beginning for analysis before moving on to productive work, but other approaches, such as Task-based Learning, may encourage learners to produce language based on their own linguistic resources and to then compare this to a model. Both approaches are equally valid and the choice will depend on the teacher and on the learners. However, if you decide to withhold the model, make sure that learners have a real opportunity to compare and consider what they could have done differently.

2. *Noticing*

Linked to the provision of a model, noticing is not only a way of finding useful language, but also a crucial skill for any language learner. Teachers often go into the lesson with the language they want to teach already pre-selected. However, it is good practice to have learners identify useful language, be it vocabulary, set phrases or grammar, so that they can then continue to notice useful language outside of the classroom.

3. *Audience*



formal in style and will include vocabulary drawn from a medical register (e.g. 'cardiac arrest' in place of 'heart attack'). Knowing who you are speaking or writing to gives a sense of purpose and authenticity to a task, and developing an awareness of style and register will help avoid causing offence (and may even mean the difference between getting the job or not!).

4. Plan and practice

Writing and speaking require practice, and lots of it. Generally speaking, learners will first take part in controlled practice before freer practice tasks. Controlled practice can be anything from a simple discrimination activity or gap fill based on the target phrases, to using the phrases to create original sentences or sections of discourse in speech or writing. However, although controlled practice usually comes in the form of discrete items (such as a number of individual sentences), these should still be linked to the topic, style and register of the freer practice, so that it is still as purposeful and authentic as possible. Where possible, give learners time to plan before any freer practice, as this will facilitate fluency and organisation and result in more complex and rich language use.

5. Feedback

Feedback is a must in any productive skills lesson. After all, why ask students to produce something if you are not going to help them to improve upon it? However, it is important to recognise that feedback and error correction are not synonymous. There are two types of feedback that should take place after speaking or writing: content feedback and linguistic feedback. Content feedback should always come first - if you expect your learners to communicate (and potentially open up about their own lives) then meaning is primary and should be treated as such. After some feedback on content, it is time for linguistic feedback. This may be, and often is, a form of error correction. However, don't miss opportunities to highlight and praise good examples of language use! If a student uses a phrase, structure or strategy that the other members of the group might benefit from, share it. Linguistic feedback is also an opportunity to 'upgrade' students' language use. A student may use a phrase that is perfectly correct, but could be expressed as an idiom which they may not know. For example, after trying to explain something to a partner, who eventually gets it, a student may exclaim "Yes! You understand me!", so feedback could refer back to this and discuss idioms like 'the penny has dropped' or 'you've hit the nail on the head'. Idioms are context dependent, so it is a good idea to teach them as the opportunities arise rather than trying to create a forced context. They also become very important at higher levels so it's good to start early, and students tend to enjoy learning them!



Teach English

International House World Organisation
Ltd
13 Mill Street
London
SE1 2BH
United Kingdom

+44 (0)20 7394 6580

advice@ih teachenglish.com

Company Registration No: 04423501

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