7 Planning and assessing speaking

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Integrating speaking into the curriculum

In designing and implementing a language course, how much emphasis should be given to speaking? How will this emphasis vary according to such factors as the level of the learners and their learning context? Should speaking be taught separately or integrated into the teaching of other aspects of linguistic competence? And what is the role of the coursebook and other materials in teaching speaking? Finally, how can speaking be assessed? These are some of the issues that will be reviewed in this final chapter.

Weighting

The relative weighting of skills work in a course will depend to a large degree on the learners' needs. Learners studying in an ESL context (that is, learning English as a second language in order to integrate into an English-speaking culture) will probably be highly motivated to improve their speaking skills as quickly as possible. Eva, a Polish emigrant to Canada, describes how she felt insufficiently prepared for speaking in her ESL classes:

> Practice is the best thing to learn. When we were by [i.e. at] the school we were in a lot of contact with English, but when I had to go out to work and speak the language, I was so scared. You don't have the practice, just the structures.

Learners studying in an EFL context (i.e. learning English as a foreign language) and in their home culture are not likely to feel as much urgency, although speaking may be a priority in the long term. Learners whose purpose is more academic (EAP, i.e. for attending a university course in an English-speaking country) may need to concentrate more on written language than on spoken. Learners who are learning English as an international language (EIL), and who therefore will be communicating primarily with other non-native speakers, are more likely to prioritize intelligibility over accuracy, especially with regard to pronunciation. And the speaking skills a business person will require are likely to differ markedly from those that are needed

by a tourist – the former needing to be competent in a wider variety of genres and registers.

Needs analysis

This suggests that, without a clear assessment of learners' needs, the relative weighting assigned to different skills will be difficult to judge. Likewise, the learners' needs will also determine the best balance between accuracy and fluency. Analysing learners' needs can be done informally, simply by talking to them, or, more formally, through the use of questionnaires or by interviewing training managers or other stakeholders. If, for example, a group of learners has requested a tailor-made course to improve their workplace English use, the following questions would need to be addressed to the individuals in the group:

1 How often do you use English at work?
   - all the time
   - frequently
   - occasionally
   - very rarely
2 How much of your workplace English is spoken (rather than written)?
   - all
   - most
   - some
   - none
3 Is your spoken English face to face or over the phone/Internet?
   - face to face only
   - phone/Internet only
   - both face to face and on the phone/Internet
4 Do you speak with native or non-native speakers in English?
   - native speakers only
   - non-native speakers only
   - both native and non-native speakers
5 Is your spoken English mainly
   - social?
   - technical?
   - both social and technical?
   - other? (please specify)
6 Is your spoken English mainly
   - formal?
   - informal?
   - both formal and informal?
7 Do you speak English mainly
   - with one other person?
   - in groups?
   - both with one person and in groups?
8 Do you speak English mainly
   - with the same person or people all the time?
   - with different people all the time?
   - with both the same people and with different people?

Further questions of a more diagnostic nature, such as those relating to the problems that the candidates may have experienced in their use of English, could then be asked. The use of simulations and role-plays to identify learners' needs and problems is also an option, albeit a fairly labour-intensive one.

Of course, it is seldom, if ever, the case that a group of learners will have identical needs, and the design and running of a course will need to be able to accommodate diversity in this respect. Some initial discussion with the class about their needs and preferences can help to make this diversity explicit and form the basis for some kind of negotiation. Using the format of a consensus debate (see page 103), for example, the learners can at first individually, and then as a group, rate the following statements:

I/We would like to do a lot of speaking and listening.
I/We would like to do a lot of reading and writing.
I/We would like to do a lot of grammar.
I/We prefer speaking in pairs and groups.
I/We prefer speaking in open class.
I/We would like to do discussions and debates.
I/We would like to do role-plays and drama.
I/We would like to give presentations to the class.
etc.

These preferences can be renegotiated periodically throughout the course and can also serve as the basis of the post-course evaluation.

Placement tests

At the very least, a **placement test** should be used for an initial assessment of the candidates' speaking skills. This applies equally to learners whose needs are very specific and to those whose needs are only vaguely formulated. It should be obvious that a quick paper-and-pencil test, such as a grammar multiple choice test, is totally inadequate in terms of assessing a learner's speaking ability. Nor is a formal interview necessarily the best way of assessing speaking if the candidate's workplace English involves informal interaction in groups. In the absence of a clear specification of needs, a placement test of speaking should include a range of interaction types. The following, for example, should serve for most general purposes, and need not last longer then ten to fifteen minutes:

1. A short informal chat, initiated by the interviewer.
2. The candidate chooses a topic from a list, or a picture from a selection, and talks for a minute or so about it. Or a picture story could serve as the basis for a narrating task.
3. The interviewer asks further questions about the topic.
4. The candidate is then invited to ask the interviewer some questions, e.g. about the institution, course of study etc.

Criteria for assessing the candidate's oral ability will be discussed below, but it is important to regard the test as a test of speaking, not solely of grammatical accuracy.

Balancing accuracy and fluency

Implicit in the kinds of decisions that need to be made at the planning stage is the issue of how to find the right balance between accuracy and fluency. At issue is not just a question of weighting, but of order. Should, for example, a focus on accuracy precede a focus on fluency, or should it come later? For a long time, language teaching operated on the basis that accuracy should precede fluency and that the only speaking that learners were allowed was the oral manipulation of recently taught grammar structures. Teaching sequences were based on the initial mastery of such items (known as **discrete items** of grammar). Only later were these items combined with other, previously learned items, and practised in free production. A great deal of remedial teaching was also required, since accuracy was as much the goal as the starting point of this very form-focused approach. And the standard by which accuracy was judged was based on descriptions of written, rather than spoken, language. In fact, language learners were set objectives that most native speakers would find hard to meet. The philosophy is summed up in this comment by Louis Alexander, from an introduction to a course published in 1967:

> The student should be trained to learn by making as few mistakes as possible. He should never be required to do anything which is beyond his capacity.

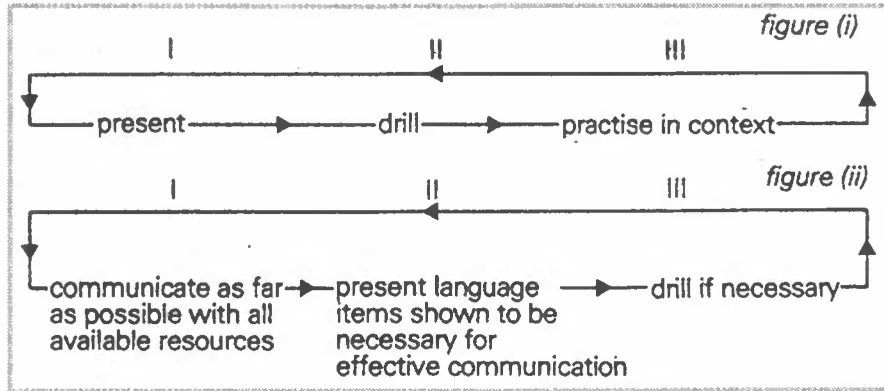
A literal interpretation of such a view led to the almost indefinite postponement of fluency practice altogether. The following 'Letter to the Student' from the fourth level of a general English course for secondary school students represents an extreme example of this attitude:

> Dear Pupil:
> You have now reached the stage in your studies that you have been dreaming about ever since you started studying English: you are going to TALK! How many times have you asked yourself when, oh, when will your teacher let you talk? You wanted to talk from your first lesson – and you did talk from your first lesson by answering questions – but your teacher kept interrupting you by correcting and directing your answers. You said over and over again that you wanted to talk, why didn't your teacher let you! The answer is simple: you were not ready yet ...

Quite understandably, this 'delayed production' approach to language learning frustrated many learners. Moreover, it did not reflect either the way the first language is acquired or the way that second languages are learned naturally. In these cases, speaking precedes, rather than follows from, complete mastery of the linguistic system. In fact, in the case of many L2 learners, complete mastery may be an unrealistic goal. It may be sufficient simply to achieve the ability to communicate intelligibly across a limited range of genres, contexts, and topics. In other words, fluency may be a more important objective than formal accuracy.

A radical re-thinking of the relative importance of accuracy and fluency fuelled the evolution of the **communicative approach**. Learners who

needed to achieve a functional degree of communicative competence as soon as possible were becoming impatient with the accuracy-fixated approach. Moreover, research was showing that learning processes, whether of language or of any cognitive skill, involve cycles of trial, error, and re-trial, and that precision is late acquired. Accordingly, proponents of a more fluency-driven approach proposed a model of instruction that started out from (rather than ended up with) the learner's attempts to communicate. The traditional and communicative models of instruction are contrasted in the following diagram:



One manifestation of this communicative model of instruction was task-based learning (see page 119). But even teachers who adhered to the traditional model find it hard to resist this new prioritizing of fluency. A more tolerant attitude to error has been one effect. Another has been the increased incorporation of fluency activities into the classroom, even at relatively early levels. This recognition of the importance of speaking for its own sake – not simply as proof of grammar mastery – has radically affected course design, including syllabus specifications and assessment.

Organizing a speaking syllabus

It has been a constant theme in this book that the skill of speaking is much more than the oral production of grammar or vocabulary items. It follows that a syllabus that is only or largely a list of such items is not a speaking syllabus. As well as re-focusing attention on fluency, the advent of the communicative approach has given rise to what are called multi-layered syllabuses, which specify not only the grammar and vocabulary components, but also the skills to be taught. Here, for example, is part of the speaking component of a recently published general English course at intermediate level, extracted from the contents page:

in unit one ...	in unit two ...	in unit three ...
speaking • talk about conversation topics • talk about jobs • discuss hopes and plans • start a conversation with a stranger • how to ... keep a conversation going	speaking • talk about travelling • discuss different forms of transport • decide what makes a good holiday • how to ... make a complaint	speaking • describe your perfect day • describe a famous actor • talk about your childhood • talk about your interest in the arts • how to .... talk about your past

Also available are materials that specifically target aspects of the speaking skill, such as conversation, discussion, and oral presentations. Here, for example, is the contents page for a book on teaching conversation, in which the material is organized in terms of specific conversational microskills and a selection of conversational topics:

Part 1: Conversation Skills
Unit 1 Conversation and cooperation
Unit 2 Expanding what you say
Unit 3 Supporting what you say
Unit 4 Summarising to show understanding
Unit 5 Going back to an earlier point
Unit 6 Vague language

Part 2: Conversation Topics
Introduction
Unit 1 Talking about children
Unit 2 Talking about etiquette
Unit 3 Talking about toys and games
Unit 4 Talking about a special occasion
Unit 5 Talking about age
Unit 6 Talking about marriage
Unit 7 Talking about friends
Unit 8 Talking about superstitions

Other ways of organizing the content of a speaking syllabus include the following:

- **spoken grammar**, including heads, tails, ellipsis, discourse markers etc.
- **pronunciation features**, including stress and intonation, rhythm, and chunking
- **communication strategies**, such as paraphrasing, appealing for help, formulaic language etc.
- **conversational routines or gambits**, such as openings, closings, interrupting, changing topic etc.

- **conversational rules and structure**, such as turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and the co-operative principle
- **speech acts**, such as inviting, requesting, complimenting etc.
- **registers**, such as formal vs informal language
- **scripts**, such as service encounters, greetings, telephone language
- **genres**, such as telling stories and jokes, making a speech, interviews
- **situations**, such as at a ticket office, at the bank, in a restaurant etc.
- **cultural factors**, such as politeness, taboo topics, use of gesture etc.

A speaking course that aimed to be comprehensive might choose from all the above strands, taking into account the specific needs and abilities of the learners.

Integrating skills

A separate speaking syllabus, or a stand-alone speaking course, might give the impression that speaking exists in isolation. In fact, very few speech events in the real world exist independently of other language skills. Even such relatively non-interactive speech events as making a formal speech involve some preparation in the form of writing. And of course speaking always assumes a listener, whether physically present or at the other end of the line. Indeed, one of the chief difficulties that speakers of another language face is the problem of understanding what other speakers are saying. Eva, the Polish migrant who we quoted at the beginning of this chapter, had this to say about her first job in Canada:

> [Munchies] was the first place that I had to be able to communicate in English. I was having a hard time with understanding, speaking, and making conversation with somebody. Many times we were having a break together and they were talking about something. Sometimes I didn't understand the topic and many times if I did understand, I didn't know enough correct words to take part in conversation ...

Speaking, therefore, needs to be practised in conjunction with other skills, which suggests an **integrated skills approach**. Nor is listening the only other skill that is implicated. Many real-world tasks that involve speaking may also involve reading and writing as well. A learner's first contacts in an English-speaking country, for instance, may be at the immigration desk of an international airport, where they will not only have to respond to questions, but they will have to interpret and complete an immigration card, follow signs, make a customs declaration, and read the associated literature. Clearly, preparation in the form solely of the speaking dimension of this task would be inadequate.

Moreover, any one speech event is likely to involve a variety of different registers. A business meeting, for example, might start with small talk as participants arrive and take their seats, move into a more formal stage where the chairperson performs various introductory rituals, before breaking into discussion and argument, which may also include banter and word play. At the same time, there will be documents to read, notes to be taken, and possibly some kind of multimedia presentation to observe.

In preparing learners for this kind of integrated experience, integrated tasks will need to complement the more segregated approach favoured by traditional **discrete-item** syllabuses. The need for such an integrated approach is one argument in favour of a task-based syllabus.

A task-based approach

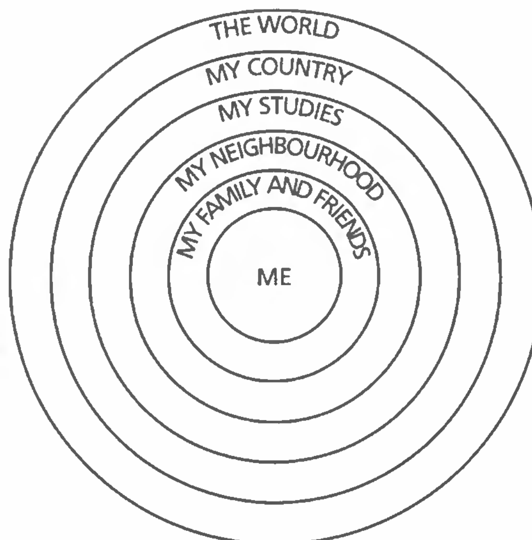
Earlier in this chapter we outlined a model of instruction based on the learners' attempts to communicate using their available resources. And in Chapter 4 (page 59) we referred to the use of task cycles that follow a 'perform – observe – re-perform' progression. An approach that foregrounds the performance of a task, and which only afterwards focuses attention on the linguistic components of that task, is known as a task-based approach. It contrasts with the approach that is known as PPP (presentation – practice – production), in which the task is the culmination of an instructional sequence rather than its starting-point. Task-based instruction was originally motivated by the belief that a language is best learned through using it, rather than learned *and then* used. As Dave Willis puts it, 'A task-based methodology is based on the belief that out of fluency comes accuracy, and that learning is prompted and refined by the need to communicate.'

The merits of task-based learning in terms of overall language acquisition are still disputed. But as a model for the development of a specific *skill*, it has a lot of attractions. As we saw in Chapter 4, the fluid performance of other skills, such as horse-riding or playing a musical instrument, involves what is essentially task-based instruction. That is, the learner performs successive trials and re-trials, with ongoing assistance from a 'better other', during which features of the new skill are noticed and integrated (or appropriated) into the performer's existing competence. Detailed explanations in advance of the students 'having a go' are often counterproductive.

A task-based syllabus for speaking, then, would be based around a sequence of integrated tasks. These would involve speaking, of course, although not necessarily exclusively. They would also, ideally, reflect the kind of language tasks that the learners would meet in the real world – as identified through needs analysis, for example. In the absence of a clear idea of the learners' future needs, as in the case of a class of teenagers, for example, the tasks should at least aim to cover a representative spread of task types and topics. Generic task types include:

- **surveys** – as when groups of learners collaboratively produce a questionnaire on the subject of music tastes, survey the rest of the class, collate the results, and report on them to the class.
- **design tasks** – as when learners collaborate in deciding on the most effective use for a vacant space in their neighbourhood and present their case to the rest of the class.
- **research tasks** – as when learners use the resources of the Internet, for example, to research an aspect of local history with a view to writing the wording for a new monument.
- **imaginative tasks** – as when learners script, perform, and record a radio drama based on a regional folk tale.

Topic domains can radiate out from the immediate world of the learner, through their local world, to national and global concerns, as in the diagram on the right:



Below, for example, is a syllabus of tasks designed for secondary school students studying English in Spain. The activities are sequenced around the preparation and presentation of a design-type task, whose topic domain is 'the world'. The different language functions involved in the performance of each task are listed in the right-hand column:

Task	Aim	Language functions
3 A GOOD CAUSE 20	To design a charity campaign, present it to your classmates and decide which charity you are going to support.	Talking about problems: *The poor are often hungry. There is too much dirty water. There aren't enough doctors.* Talking about obligation: *The homeless have to sleep in the streets.* Making suggestions: *We think 'Save the Panda' should get £2,000.*
4 HEROES 26	To tell your classmates about your hero and decide who is the 'hero of heroes'.	Talking about personality: *I think Joan of Arc was very brave.* Talking about achievements: *I've discovered a new virus. Einstein won the Nobel prize.* Asking/Talking about the past: *Who sang 'Imagine'? He lived in Paris.*

As an example of how a task integrates a variety of skills, including speaking, here is a breakdown of the steps involved in Task 3 of the above syllabus ('A good cause'):

- reading brochures from a variety of charities (*reading*)
- using dictionaries to check the meaning of unknown words (*reading*)
- talking in open class about local charities and discussing their merits (*speaking*)
- working in groups to choose 'a good cause' to prepare a campaign for (*speaking*)
- using dictionaries to access relevant vocabulary (*reading*)
- collaboratively writing the text of a campaign brochure (*speaking and writing*)
- presenting the campaign to the rest of the class (*speaking*)
- listening to and evaluating other groups' presentations (*listening*)
- deciding, in groups, on how a fixed sum of money might most deservedly be allocated between the various campaigns (*speaking*)
- reporting the group decision to the class (*speaking*)

Notice that, not only are there frequent opportunities in this sequence for speaking, but the speaking takes many forms. At times it is informal, unrehearsed, and non-public, as when the groups are talking together to plan their writing. At other times it is more formal, rehearsed, and public, as when the groups present their campaign to the class. An integrated, task-based approach, therefore, would seem to offer plentiful and varied opportunities to develop the speaking skill.

A genre-based approach

Task-based instruction has been criticized, however, on the grounds that it prioritizes the **processes** of using language, at the expense of a focus on the **products**, i.e. the kinds of texts – both spoken and written – that learners will need to (re-)produce. This is particularly the case in ESL contexts, where learners are under considerable pressure to match their uses of language with the expectations of the target community. A new arrival in Australia, for example, needs to know how to make a good impression in a job interview, taking into account the way that such interviews are typically transacted in the Australian context. A task-based approach, it is argued, favours an implicit approach to instruction, when in fact learners need clear and explicit models of the language behaviours they are going to encounter.

A genre-based approach attempts to redress this lack of explicitness by providing direct instruction in the way language events such as job interviews are typically realized, and by relating these features to the social context and purpose of the event. In Chapter 2, we defined a spoken genre as simply being 'a type of speech event' such as a chat, an interview, or a presentation. Proponents of a genre-based approach would go further and emphasize that genres are not only structured in predictable ways, but that they are purposeful, socially situated, and culturally sanctioned. The starting point in a genre-oriented sequence of instruction, therefore, is establishing the social purpose and cultural context of the genre in question. This is followed by the presentation and analysis of a typical example before learners attempt to create their own examples. The more elaborated description of the teaching/learning cycle of a genre-oriented approach at the top of page 122 comes from Susan Beez's *Text-based Syllabus Design*.

This lesson sequence is then mapped on to a syllabus that is designed to reflect the practical needs of learners as they integrate into the target culture. In the middle of page 122, for example, is an excerpt from the contents page of an intermediate course for ESL learners in Australia. It shows the topical and speaking/listening strands of the course.

The task-based versus genre-based distinction echoes the process versus product approaches to the teaching of writing (see *How to Teach Writing* by Jeremy Harmer in this series). The same criticisms of a product-based writing can be levelled at genre-based teaching. That is, the focus on imitating models does not necessarily reflect the way that writers (and speakers) produce texts (or talk) in reality. Moreover, the emphasis on the genre as a culturally instituted form obscures the fact that successful language users are able to use their knowledge of genres creatively in order to achieve their own purposes. Also, in emphasizing cultural factors, a focus on genre tends to

First stage of the cycle	• activities build knowledge of a context of language use which is related to learner needs • activities involve visuals, realia, excursions, discussions, field-work, and vocabulary building • parallel activities build cross-cultural strategies and pronunciation or spelling skills
Second stage of the cycle	• involves a close investigation of the purpose and structure of a model of a text type which occurs in the context • students focus on the register and language features which are central to the text achieving its purpose • language features are studied at both whole text and clause level
Third stage of the cycle	• initial activities provide students with opportunities to use the text type with support • later activities gradually demand more independent performances

Unit	Topics	Speaking and Listening
1	• family and neighbours	• listening to a casual conversation • starting conversations • changing topics in conversation
2	• early childhood services • immunisation • travelling and sight-seeing	• talking to an early childhood nurse • giving instructions • giving personal information • checking personal information
3	• conflict • smoking • opinions • attitudes • marriage customs	• listening to a casual conversation • expressing anger • closing a conversation

exaggerate the differences between the way language events are achieved in different cultures, at the expense of the similarities. Finally, by foregrounding the analysis of texts, there is a danger that teaching can become somewhat academic, with a preponderance of 'chalk-and-talk' type instruction.

Nevertheless, for certain learners in particular contexts, a genre-based approach may be more efficient. More formulaic genres, such as formal presentations, lend themselves to a genre-based approach. And the emphasis on context, purpose, and the expectations of the audience, foregrounds the importance of taking register factors into account (see page 19).

In the end, it is not that difficult to marry the two approaches, the task-based one and the genre-based one. This can be done either by including a more explicit focus on the features of the genre in a task-based approach or by beginning a genre-based approach with a 'trial run'. This then can be used as a point of comparison with the performance of a more expert user.

Classroom talk

Whatever the instructional approach that is adopted, the single most influential factor in the development of speaking skills is probably the classroom culture. A classroom culture that prioritizes communication is bound to promote the development of speaking, especially if the quality of communication is high. Herbert Puchta and Michael Schratz define this kind of communication in these terms:

> If the participants are being both frank and considerate, independent yet co-operative, and are speaking willingly and comprehensibly to particular listeners about things that matter to them both, then the quality of communication is high.

This requires, in turn, that teachers accept that – for at least some of the time – learners should have some say (literally) in the classroom culture. The writer Claire Kramsch offers some ground rules whereby more say can be devolved to the learners, through, for example, allowing them topic control and giving them more responsibility for the turn-taking in classroom talk. Here are some of her 'rules' for teachers:

- use the target language not only to deal with the subject matter but also to regulate the interaction in the classroom. You will thus offer a model of how to use interactional gambits in natural discourse.
- keep the number of display questions (i.e. teacher questions that are aimed at getting learners to 'display' their knowledge, such as 'What's the past of *go*?') to a minimum. The more genuine the requests for information, the more natural the discourse.
- build the topic at hand together with the students; assume that whatever they say contributes to the topic. Do not cut off arbitrarily a student's utterance because you perceive it to be irrelevant. It might be very relevant to the student's perception of the topic.
- tolerate silences; refrain from filling the gaps between turns. This will put pressure on students to initiate turns.
- encourage students to sustain their speech beyond one or two sentences and to take longer turns; do not use a student's short utterance as a springboard for your own lengthy turn.
- extend your exchanges with individual students to include clarification of the speaker's intentions and a negotiation of meanings; do not cut off too soon an exchange to pass on to another student.
- pay attention to the message of students' utterances rather than to the form in which they are cast. Keep your comments for later.
- make extensive use of natural feedback ('hmm'/'interesting'/'I thought so too') rather than evaluating and judging every student utterance following its delivery ('fine'/'good'). Do not over-praise.
- give students explicit credit by quoting them ('just as X said'); do not take credit for what students contributed by giving the impression that you had thought about it before.

There is a growing body of opinion that the kind of classroom culture implied by the above 'rules' not only promotes speaking skills but also serves in the

development of the language overall, including its grammar and vocabulary. That is, that through talk, a language can be acquired. The idea is, of course, not new. Here, for example, is how the writer of a textbook for Argentinian students put it, in 1953:

> Conversation must not only be considered one of the aims of an English course. It is the means to the desired end. Only by speaking a language can we ever hope to learn it.

This view contrasts radically with the 'don't talk until you are ready' philosophy mentioned earlier in this chapter. In fact, there has always been an uneasy tension between these two extremes: the view that using a language follows on from the learning of it and the view that using *is* learning. Making room for conversation in the classroom, and giving learners more say in the classroom culture, is often compromised by the belief that learners need grammar first and foremost. This can result in situations where learners are sometimes actually discouraged from speaking about the things that they want to, as in this extract from a classroom in Mexico. (The numbers in brackets represent pause length in seconds.)

> [after taking the register, the teacher starts chatting to students]
> T: Well then, Jorge ... did you have a good weekend?
> S: Yes
> T: What did you do?
> S: I got married.
> T: [smiling] you got married. (0.7) You certainly had a good weekend then. (5.0) [laughter and buzz of conversation]
> T: Now turn to page 56 in your books. (1.6) you remember last time we were talking about biographies ... .
> [T checks book and lesson plan while other students talk to Jorge in Spanish about his nuptials.]

This kind of situation, in which the textbook and lesson plan conspire against the development of an authentically communicative classroom culture, is often exacerbated by the nature of many tests and examinations – a subject which we will now turn to.

Assessing speaking

Testing, both informally and formally, takes place at the beginning and at the end of most language courses, as well as at various times during the course itself. We have already noted that, at placement, an assessment of learners' speaking skills can be done by means of an interview that includes different oral tasks. A placement test that includes no spoken component provides an inadequate basis for assessing speaking, and the same can be said for any test of overall language proficiency, whether it aims to test **progress** during the course, or **achievement** at the end of it.

The problem, however, with including an oral component in a test is that it considerably complicates the testing procedure, both in terms of its practicality and the way assessment criteria can be reliably applied. Setting

and marking a written test of grammar is relatively easy and time-efficient. A test of speaking, on the other hand, is not. If all the students of a class have to be interviewed individually, the disruption caused, and the time taken, may seem to outweigh the benefits. Moreover, different testers may have very different criteria for judging speaking, differences that are less acute when it comes to judging writing or grammar knowledge, for example.

All these difficulties aside, a language programme that prioritizes speaking but doesn't test it *through* speaking can't be said to be doing its job properly. To re-state a point made earlier: a test of grammar is *not* a test of speaking. The need to test speaking through speaking is particularly acute if learners are hoping to enter for a public examination which includes a speaking component, such as the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) or the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) examination. Furthermore, where teachers or students are reluctant to engage in much classroom speaking, the effect of an oral component in the final examination can be a powerful incentive to 'do more speaking' in class. This is known as the **washback effect** of testing, i.e. the oral nature of the test 'washes back' into the coursework that precedes it.

It therefore makes sense to incorporate oral testing procedures into language courses despite the difficulties. Since the activities designed to test speaking are generally the same as the kinds of activities designed to practise speaking, there need be no disruption to classroom practice. The challenge is more in deciding and applying satisfactory assessment criteria.

Types of spoken tests

The most commonly used spoken test types are these:

- **Interviews** – these are relatively easy to set up, especially if there is a room apart from the classroom where learners can be interviewed. The class can be set some writing or reading task (or even the written component of the examination) while individuals are called out, one by one, for their interview. Such interviews are not without their problems, though. The rather formal nature of interviews (whether the interviewer is the learner's teacher or an outside examiner) means that the situation is hardly conducive to testing more informal, conversational speaking styles. Not surprisingly, students often underperform in interview-type conditions. It is also difficult to eliminate the effects of the interviewer – his or her questioning style, for example – on the interviewee's performance. Finally, if the interviewer is also the assessor, it may be difficult to maintain the flow of the talk while at the same time making objective judgments about the interviewee's speaking ability. Nevertheless, there are ways of circumventing some of these problems. A casual chat at the beginning can help put candidates at their ease. The use of pictures or a pre-selected topic as a focus for the interview can help, especially if candidates are given one or two minutes to prepare themselves in advancc. If the questions are the same for each interview, the interviewer effect is at least the same for all candidates. And having a third party present to co-assess the candidate can help ensure a degree of objectivity.

- **Live monologues** – the candidates prepare and present a short talk on a pre-selected topic. This eliminates the interviewer effect and provides evidence of the candidates' ability to handle an extended turn, which is not always possible in interviews. If other students take the role of the audience, a question-and-answer stage can be included, which will provide some evidence of the speaker's ability to speak interactively and spontaneously. But giving a talk or presentation is only really a valid test if these are skills that learners are likely to need, e.g. if their purpose for learning English is business, law, or education.
- **Recorded monologues** – these are perhaps less stressful than a more public performance and, for informal testing, they are also more practicable in a way that live monologues are not. Learners can take turns to record themselves talking about a favourite sport or pastime, for example, in a room adjacent to the classroom, with minimal disruption to the lesson. The advantage of recorded tests is that the assessment can be done after the event, and results can be 'triangulated' – that is, other examiners can rate the recording and their ratings can be compared to ensure standardization.
- **Role-plays** – most students will be used to doing at least simple role-plays in class, so the same format can be used for testing. The other 'role' can be played either by the tester or another student, but again, the influence of the interlocutor is hard to control. The role-play should not require sophisticated performance skills or a lot of imagination. Situations grounded in everyday reality are best. They might involve using data that has been provided in advance. For example, students could use the information in a travel brochure to make a booking at a travel agency. This kind of test is particularly valid if it closely matches the learners' needs. One problem, though, with basing the test around written data is that it then becomes a partial test of reading skills as well.
- **Collaborative tasks and discussions** – these are similar to role-plays except that the learners are not required to assume a role but simply to be themselves. For example, two candidates might be set the task of choosing between a selection of job applicants on the basis of their CVs. Or the learners simply respond with their own opinions to a set of statements relevant to a theme. Of course, as with role-plays, the performance of one candidate is likely to affect that of the others, but at least the learners' interactive skills can be observed in circumstances that closely approximate real-life language use.

The CELS Test of Speaking

In practice, formal examinations often include a range of test types, so that the strengths of one type counterbalance the weaknesses of another and allow learners to show themselves to their best advantage. For example, the Cambridge Certificate in English Language Speaking Skills (CELS) Test of Speaking, like its Trinity College equivalent, the ESOL Spoken Grade Examinations, is a stand-alone test of speaking that can be taken at three

different levels. It involves a number of different interactions. The standard format for the test involves two examiners and two candidates and lasts 20 minutes. One examiner acts as both assessor and interlocutor (that is to say, he or she interacts with the candidate at the same time as evaluating the candidate's responses), while the other acts as assessor only. The format of the test is as follows:

- The candidates are given the first task (see Example 1 on page 128) and have a minute and a half to prepare.
- The candidates talk individually with the interlocutor on prompts they have chosen and in response to questions from the interlocutor. This stage lasts seven minutes.
- They are then given the second, interactive, task (see Example 2 on page 128), and, again, have a minute and a half to prepare.
- The candidates talk together for four minutes, using the written stimulus.
- Then there is a three-way discussion related to the task between the candidates and the interlocutor, which lasts another four minutes.

Note that the test involves individual speech, dialogue, and three-way discussion. Note also that the tasks require only the most minimal processing of written text, to ensure that reading ability does not interfere with the testing of speaking.

Assessment criteria

Having obtained a sample of the learner's speaking ability, how does one go about assessing it? There are two main ways: either giving it a single score on the basis of an overall impression (called **holistic scoring**) or giving a separate score for different aspects of the task (**analytic scoring**). Holistic scoring (e.g. giving an overall mark out of, say, 20) has the advantage of being quicker, and is probably adequate for informal testing of progress. Ideally, though, more than one scorer should be enlisted, and any significant differences in scoring should be discussed and a joint score negotiated.

Analytic scoring takes longer, but compels testers to take a variety of factors into account and, if these factors are well chosen, is probably both fairer and more reliable. One disadvantage is that the scorer may be distracted by all the categories and lose sight of the overall picture – a woods-and-trees situation. Four or five categories seems to be the maximum that even trained scorers can handle at one time.

For the CELS Test of Speaking (described above) there are four categories: 'Grammar and Vocabulary', 'Discourse Management', 'Pronunciation', and 'Interactive Communication'. They are described in the following terms:

- **Grammar and Vocabulary** – on this scale, candidates are awarded marks for the accurate and appropriate use of syntactic forms and vocabulary in order to meet the task requirements at each level. The range and appropriate use of vocabulary are also assessed here.
- **Discourse Management** – on this scale, examiners are looking for evidence of the candidate's ability to express ideas and opinions in coherent, connected speech. The CELS tasks require candidates to construct sentences and produce utterances (extended as appropriate) in order to

CANDIDATE'S TASK SHEET
Preliminary, Part 1

Example 1

You are going to talk about the town or city where you are now. What do you like or dislike about it?

The following may give you some ideas.

Choose 2 or 3 that you would like to talk about. Add other ideas of your own if you wish. Think about what you want to say and make some notes if you want.

- Restaurants
- Buildings
- Cinemas, clubs etc
- Shops
- Traffic problems
- Parks or gardens
- Other ...

CANDIDATE'S TASK SHEET
Preliminary, Part 2

Example 2

The school or college where you learn English is planning a new Students' Room for all the students to use. Below are some ideas for things to put in the Students' Room.

Look at the list of suggestions below and decide which three you think are best. Add other ideas of your own if you wish. Think about what you want to say, and make some notes if you want.

- Food and drink machines
- TV
- Computers with Internet
- Magazines and newspapers
- Comfortable furniture
- Table tennis
- Other things

Discuss your choices with your partner and try to agree on three things which you think would be most popular with the students.

Then the examiner will ask you about your discussion.

When do you think you would use a room like this?

convey information and to express or justify opinions. The candidate's ability to maintain a coherent flow of language with an appropriate range of linguistic resources over several utterances is assessed here.

- **Pronunciation** – this refers to the candidate's ability to produce comprehensible utterances to fulfil the task requirements, i.e. it refers to the production of individual sounds, the appropriate linking of words,

and the use of stress and intonation to convey the intended meaning. L1 accents are acceptable provided communication is not impeded.

- **Interactive Communication** – this refers to the candidate's ability to interact with the interlocutor and the other candidate by initiating and responding appropriately and at the required speed and rhythm to fulfil the task requirements. It includes the ability to use functional language and strategies to maintain or repair interaction, e.g. in conversational turn-taking, and a willingness to develop the conversation and move the task towards a conclusion. Candidates should be able to maintain the coherence of the discussion and may, if necessary, ask the interlocutor or the other candidate for clarification.

It is worth emphasizing that grammatical accuracy is only one of several factors, and teachers need to remind themselves when assessing speaking that even native speakers produce non-grammatical forms in fast, unmonitored speech. It would be unfair, therefore, to expect a higher degree of precision in learners than native speakers are capable of.

The CELS Test of Speaking can be taken at three levels, which correspond to levels B1, B2, and C1 of the Common European Framework (CEF). The CEF provides useful descriptors for different skills competences at each of its six levels, and these in turn can provide teachers with handy criteria for assessing their learners' abilities. The CEF distinguishes between *speaking* (or *oral production*), on the one hand, and *spoken interaction* on the other. The descriptors for oral production at all levels are displayed in the table below, in the form of 'can do' statements.

	OVERALL ORAL PRODUCTION
C2	Can produce clear, smoothly flowing well-structured speech with an effective logical structure which helps the recipient to notice and remember significant points.
C1	Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on complex subjects, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion.
B2	Can give clear, systematically developed descriptions and presentations, with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail. Can give clear, detailed descriptions and presentations on a wide range of subjects related to his/her field of interest, expanding and supporting ideas with subsidiary points and relevant examples.
B1	Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of one of a variety of subjects within his/her field of interest, presenting it as a linear sequence of points.
A2	Can give a simple description or presentation of people, living or working conditions, daily routines, likes/dislikes etc as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list.
A1	Can produce simple mainly isolated phrases about people and places.

Descriptors for spoken interaction (as opposed to one-way oral production) include such factors as:

- turn-taking skills
- communication strategies
- spontaneity
- asking for clarification
- information exchange
- politeness strategies

Finally, learners themselves should be encouraged to take some responsibility for their own assessment. Asking them to record and assess themselves, using criteria that have been discussed in advance, is one way of doing this. Simply counting the length of pause-free runs is a crude but effective way of measuring their fluency, especially over successive repetitions of the same task. Here, for example, is a student doing a task once and then five minutes later, having given it some thought. The pauses are marked with vertical lines.

First attempt:
I remember my worst teacher | um still. | Er he was very very bad because | er, the time that I | was | er learning | with | him | er was compliba ... | complicate | to me understand | er all the lesson | because | because | he | was | not | expressive. | Er he | only | only | speak | explained | the | the lessons | er always following the | the | the book | without | to | explain more things | about | er the lesson | or about | the thing that | can | be important to | to | to understand the | the lesson

Second attempt:
I still remember my | last | my | my worst teacher because | er he was really | really bad. | It was | very complicate to understand | him | because | he wasn't | too much expressive | and | and he was really | really really serious. | Mm-hm mm he | only | followed | the | the | the book | doing the lesson | without to explain | more important things | so | we | we didn't understand the | the | the main matter of the | of the lesson

In the first attempt the student averages 2.1 words per run; in the second this has improved to 2.4. A less laborious way of measuring fluency might simply be to count the runs of three words or more: nine in the first instance, twelve in the second.

Learners can also be asked to evaluate their speaking using the kinds of 'can do' statements included in the CEF (see above). As more and more coursebooks incorporate CEF assessment guidelines, these are likely to become a familiar tool in both the planning and testing of speaking activities.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have considered ways that speaking can be integrated into the curriculum, including issues of:

- **weighting** – different learning objectives (such as business, travel, academic studies) will determine the priority given to oral communication.
- **syllabus organization**, in terms of:
  - speech genres, e.g. small talk, meetings, presentations
  - situations, e.g. at the post office, in the pub
  - topics
  - conversational skills, strategies, and rules
  - speech acts, such as requesting, apologizing
  - conversational routines
  - spoken grammar, vocabulary
  - pronunciation.
- **methodological approach**, e.g.:
  - a task-based approach, where the *processes* of speaking are foregrounded
  - a genre-based approach, where the *products* of speaking are foregrounded
  - a classroom culture that prioritizes authentic communication.
- **testing** – including the choice of test-type (interview, role-play etc) and scoring criteria (e.g. holistic or analytic).

Postscript

The point has been made, but is worth repeating by way of a conclusion, that the teaching of speaking depends on there being a classroom culture of speaking. Learners cannot learn to speak simply through doing reading and writing activities, or exercises on vocabulary and grammar. Where speaking is a priority, language classrooms need to become *talking* classrooms. The point is well made in this extract from a short story about a language school in New Zealand, where one of the students has been rushed into hospital. The teacher and students visit the hospital. Afterwards they return to the classroom:

> ... now any semblance of instruction had broken down.
>
> Or had it? What does a teacher do at a language school?
>
> You talk, essentially. You need some kind of crutch – a textbook, a theme – but the main thing is to talk and cause the students to talk. There are the ESOL dogmas: the Four Skills – two *active* (Speaking, Writing), two *passive* (Listening, Reading); the Three 'P's – Presentation, Practice, Performance. Essentially, though, it's talking that's required.
>
> We talked that day ...