

**KOHUTOVÁ V.**

**TEACHING SPEAKING IN A NUTSHELL FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS  
AND TEACHERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

**Abstract.** Current needs of the society that are reflected in educational objectives derived from communicative competence and the ultimate objective of studying English as a foreign language, are more in the foreground. One of these current needs is the ability to communicate effectively. Speaking as a skill is still more and more emphasized as employers look for communicatively competent employees. The author pays due attention to this particular skill and explores it in detail by providing a clear summary of speaking sub-skills, a precise description of a proper and successful speaking activity and a typology of speaking activities needed to be practiced in English classrooms.

**Keywords:** English language, speaking, language systems, language skills, speaking sub-skills, communication, speaking activities.

**КОХУТОВА В.**

**ФОРМИРОВАНИЕ РЕЧЕВЫХ НАВЫКОВ ПРИ ОБУЧЕНИИ  
АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ КАК ИНОСТРАННОМУ СТУДЕНТОВ ВУЗОВ**

**Аннотация.** В настоящее время цели обучения иностранным языкам наиболее полно отражают актуальные потребности общества. В этой связи на первый план выходит изучение английского языка с целью обретения коммуникативных навыков, так как эффективное иноязычное общение является первоочередной задачей, стоящей перед современным обществом. Так, работодатели все больше внимания обращают на умение своих сотрудников говорить на иностранном языке. Автор подробно рассматривает данный навык посредством описания видов говорения, а также наиболее эффективных типов речевых упражнений, которые необходимо практиковать на уроке английского языка как иностранного для успешного обретения иноязычных коммуникативных навыков.

**Ключевые слова:** английский язык, говорение, язык как система, языковые навыки, навыки говорения, коммуникация, виды говорения.

**Introduction**

The times we are living in ask for creative, flexible and communicatively able individuals who would be able to cope with everyday situations, problems and challenges the society and the twenty-first century with its novelty bring. One of numerous requirements put on people as productive citizens is the ability to communicate and interact with others whether in mother tongue or foreign languages.

The Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of the Slovak Republic realizes this one/particular requirement and therefore speaking as one of four skills to be developed in learners has its significant place in the national curriculum, abbreviated as ŠVP in Slovakia. The way foreign languages, among which there is English, too, were taught has changed in the last few decades due to several factors such as the political system, the rise in science and technology, globalization, the needs of a trade market and the society, and the phenomenon known as multiculturalism, closely related to migration. Similarly, Horváthová [6, p. 60] expresses her observation that “the curricula and content of education in general and language education have changed. Besides the linguistic content, which used to be the most important aspect of language teaching, other factors now play a significant role”. Reid [10, p. 29] in her scientific paper closely focuses on the curriculum and a curriculum reform in Slovakia, where she argues that “the priority of language education is the acquisition and development of competences that enable us to act”. Additionally, according to Kováčiková [7, p. 69] “the foreign language education has been supported and its role is to broaden the language competences and thus integrate and realize own ideas”. From the previous lines, it is clear that the importance of language competences, which constitute the communicative competence – the ultimate objective of learning English, is unquestionable. Knowing what to do with the language is far more important for real-practical life than knowing the language.

People study foreign languages for various real-practical reasons. For instance, exams, certificates, job interviews, job promotion, travel, holidays, job opportunities in better-paid countries, studies abroad, meetings with clients and potential business partners and many others. However, the ultimate objective that all of these reasons for studying English have in common is the ability to understand and to be understood. To say it differently, the point is to get the message through without a communication breakdown. Speaking as an inseparable component of any language is very practical in its essence and therefore speaking practice at schools must resemble real speaking as much as possible. Speaking activities and tasks carried out in schooling institutions must be communicative, meaningful, personalized and diverse just as life in general is. Only then, our graduates will have a real chance to be successful and contribute to the common welfare of the present and yet to come generation.

### **1. Structure of a language**

First, it is important to start with what to teach when teaching English as a foreign language in general. English language can be divided into systems and skills. There are four systems: grammatical, lexical, phonological and functional. Grammatical system deals with how individual words interact

with each other. Lexical system involves vocabulary or lexis and their meanings. Phonological involves teaching pronunciation, intonation, stress and other suprasegmental features. The fourth and the last system is functional – different functions are expressed through various grammatical structures and word phrases used in various situations. Function is the use of a structure, in other words what a learner can do with it [11]. Skills on the other hand are divided into two groups. Listening and reading form a group of so called receptive skills. Learners receive the language. Speaking and writing are productive skills as the learners produce the language. This paper focuses on speaking and analyzes it in detail, but we touch on other skills, too because they are interconnected. For example, a conversation between two people requires both speaking and listening. In this case productive skill – speaking depends on a receptive skill – listening. If the listener does not understand the language, s/he can not produce any language either. It is the same with writing and reading. For instance, a learner receives an email, but does not understand it. How can he/she reply, in other words, produce language if the reading comprehension is very low? These are only a few of many examples which prove that productive skills depend on receptive skills. They go hand in hand. Harmer [3, p. 52] also radically refuses the concept of teaching language skills separately and says “one skill cannot be performed without another”.

In previous centuries emphasis was placed on grammar, reading and writing. Repetition and drills of the language were widely spread. Nowadays, the objective of teaching English is a balance between systems and skills. It is necessary to realize that “there can be no speaking if you do not have the vocabulary to speak with, there is no point learning words unless we can do something useful with them” [12, p. 21]. Even though, the objective is an equal ratio of all the skills, speaking and listening are emphasized and somewhat superior due to their use in everyday life. Do we read and write or listen and speak more frequently in everyday communication? The definite answer is we speak and listen. After all, we want the foreign language to be acquired and learned in the most similar way to a mother tongue.

## **2. Teaching speaking**

It has been already mentioned that speaking is a priority for many language learners. They need and want to master this skill for a wide range of reasons. For instance, “to keep up rapport in relationships, influence people, and win or lose negotiations” [5, p. 261].

Speaking as a skill does not exist in isolation. Teachers never say to their students that they are going to learn how to speak in the particular lesson. Speaking occurs in every lesson because it represents an inseparable part of a learning process. Even if students practice systems, they practice

speaking as well. However, speaking is not the main objective. Then, there are such speaking activities which are supposed to motivate learners, activate their background knowledge or engage them with a topic. They are of a minor importance again because they serve as a lead-in activity in the development of other skills – writing, listening and reading. The most considerable representation of speaking activities occurs in a form of follow-up activities. They follow right after reading or listening. More time can be spent on them and so speaking with its subskills are developed in the figurative sense of a word.

The following lines deal with speaking sub-skills. Brown and Ur state these speaking sub-skills as the objectives of teaching speaking:

- producing short and long turns
- taking turns in conversations
- opening and closing conversations
- initiating and responding to talk
- developing and maintaining a talk
- using conversation in various situations and social settings
- altering between formal and informal style
- using a variety of language functions
- showing interest in the speaker speaking
- using verbal and non-verbal strategies to avoid communication breakdown [1; 14].

Lindsay and Knight mention a slightly different list of sub-skills learners need to develop in order to be effective communicators:

- producing connected speech
- the ability to interact
- talking round gaps in their knowledge
- speaking in a range of contexts
- balancing accuracy and fluency [8].

First, learners need to put a message – what they want to express together and communicate it. Secondly, they need to interact with other people. Learners are expected to respond, too. They also need to be able to explain words or phrases which they either have forgotten or have not learned before. This ability helps them keep a conversation going in spite of the lack of language knowledge or factors which cut down the language production such as fatigue, distraction or present mental disposition. In other words, learners should learn how to define things, people or places. For example: it is a thing

which; it is a person who; it is a place where etc. The next speaking sub-skill which learners need to develop is speaking in a variety of contexts. Learners will use different language when talking to a friend, to a stranger or to an employer. For that reason, teachers should provide a range of contexts. For example: being at home, at work, at school, in a restaurant, post office and so on. The last speaking subskill means that the language produced by a learner should be that/as accurate for the listener to understand it without any problems.

There is no doubt that speaking activities are used in every language classroom. However, the quality of these activities is questionable. In the following lines we deal with qualities of speaking activities, types of activities and characteristics of a successful speaking activity.

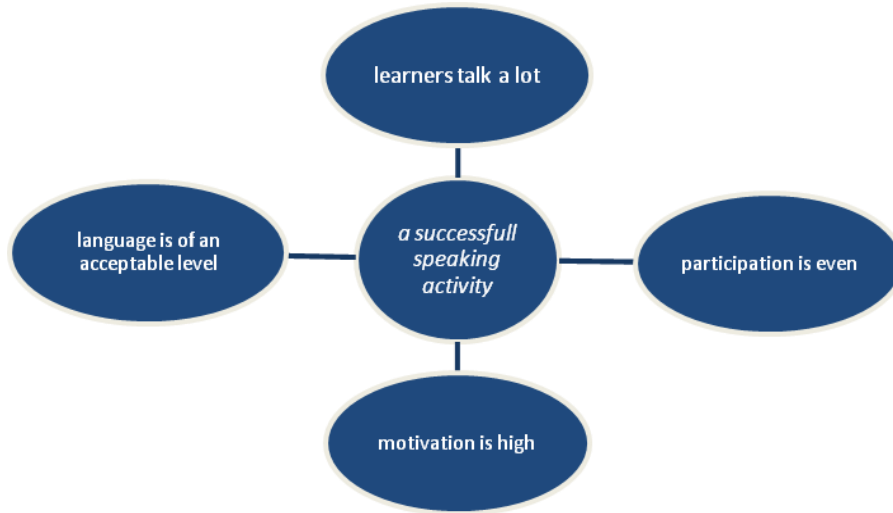
### **3. Qualities of speaking activities**

According to Straková and Cimermanová (2005) all speaking activities should be important/relevant to students, well-structured, personalized, appropriate to learners' level and interest. Students must feel that what they do is meaningful and so helpful for their future real life communication. We can not ask students to use language in a way that can be used only in a classroom. In real life conversation people talk and so exchange information. Their conversation is original. It would be absolutely awkward to repeat the whole conversation from the very beginning to its end [13].

In everyday situations people communicate because they have a 'communicative need'. On the other hand, quite a lot of classroom speaking activities are done in a form of answering questions to which the answers are known in advance. The purpose of such questions is not a communicative need but to practice language, grammar, vocabulary or pronunciation. These activities, however, play an important role in building the language. They provide a safe environment to practice what might be used in a real communication. Although their importance is undoubted, students find them rather boring and monotonous. That is why the teacher should provide enough space for practising both systems and skills and so ensure an appropriate ration between them. If a teacher does not plan an activity in detail, in other words underestimates objectives, the procedure of the activity or its duration, it will not bring success but failure.

All speaking activities must meet learners' level. It means they can not be too simple or too difficult. If an activity is too simple, students get bored. On the other hand, if it is too difficult, they will lose their interest and stop focusing. The best speaking activities are those which are challenging but achievable. Motivation plays a huge role in a learning process. Learners with intrinsic motivation are said to learn faster and achieve better results. The so called intrinsic motivation has proven to be a more

effective drive than extrinsic one. Extrinsic motivation on the other hand can be understood as external forces due to which students learn and work with the language. It can be parents' threats, grades or a chance to get a better job or to be hired. It is up to us, the teachers, to highly motivate students, to arise their interest and thus get them involved in activities we want them to do. The topics covered should be interesting and attractive. Ur (1991, p. 120) describes these as the characteristic features of a successful speaking activity:



Pic. 1. A successful speaking activity.

We will describe only the first two because features three and four are analysed above. One of the problems which make a speaking activity unsuccessful is either very low learner talking time (LTT) or inhibition. It means that it should be learners and not the teacher who occupies the majority of time by speaking. Unfortunately, teacher talking time (TTT) is quite high and as a result of that, learners are not given sufficient time to develop their speaking skills. Even if the teacher talking time is low, the speaking activity can be unsuccessful. Then, inhibition is a stumbling block. Learners' fear of failure, criticism, a loss of face or attracting too much attention inhibit the learning process. They must overcome their worries otherwise speaking activities and in general development of speaking skills will be inhibited. To make a speaking activity a success, participation must be even. In other words, all learners should contribute and not only the most talkative ones. Quite often, students when asked to express their own opinion, do not say anything or just a very typical cliché 'I do not know'. However, learners must realize that if they want to communicate successfully they have to sometimes push themselves to speaking. Teachers give them a chance to talk and so they should make use of it.

#### 4. Real versus classroom communication

There are many differences between real and classroom communication. However, we should try to move as close as possible to real communication. Why is it so important to provide as many opportunities for real communication as possible? Real talk is highly motivating. Learners come to an English classroom because they want and need to understand and to be understood. Learners want to experience language for real or outside purposes, not artificial or classroom ones. That is why, what students do in the classroom every day should be as similar as it can be to real life. The chart illustrates differences between these two types of communication.

Table 1

Real versus classroom communication (own adaptation)

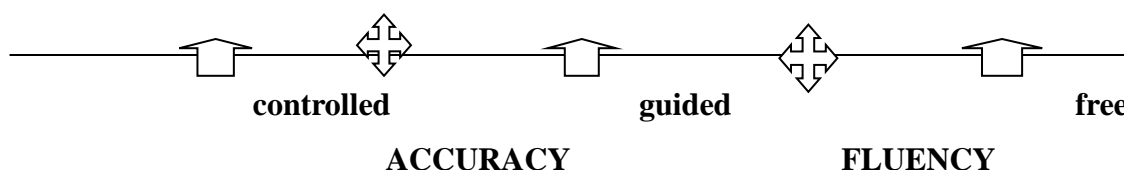
<i>Real communication</i>	<i>Classroom communication</i>
genuine	can be repeated several times, word by word
not prepared in advance	some speaking classroom activities such as dialogues or role plays can be rehearsed
shared context	context is not always real
the language we hear is unpredictable	topic and situation are given by the teacher or a textbook
a speaker has a purpose – asking for the information we need, talking in order to tell people things they do not know, answering other people's questions	purpose is pedagogical
no task set	a teacher sets a task
all speakers are equal	Even though a teacher tries to be a friend with his/her students, they will always keep in mind the fact that the teacher is superior due to his roles of an organizer, assessor and controller.
no assessment, no evaluation of the production	students' production is assessed either formatively or summatively

The above mentioned points are explained in the following lines. Real communication is genuine in a way that what language speakers produce is spontaneous and unrehearsed. On the other hand, communication which takes place in a classroom is quite often far from spontaneous and unrehearsed because students' books include many activities which ask students to practise dialogues in

pairs. These types of tasks are strictly controlled. People communicate because they have a purpose, for example they want to order a meal, send a letter, ask for the next train, chat with a friend or an acquaintance, ask a teacher about how well their children do at school, describe symptoms to a doctor, ask for directions and so on. In the classroom, purpose is purely pedagogical as a teacher sets a task to complete. The task is set to practise the target language before learners use it in real life. The topic and the situation are given either by a teacher or a textbook and that makes the language production predictable. However, what we hear in real life can not be predicted. One is not able to guess what prognosis a doctor will likely say, what news friends will share with us or which direction a stranger will give us. While all speakers are equal when communicating in real life, a distinction between a teacher and his/her students is present in the classroom. Even though, teachers are very friendly and open nowadays and engage students to a teaching process by letting them make decisions, their superiority is undeniable. It is a teacher to whom students turn for guidance and advice. Another distinct difference between real and classroom communication is the assessment. Speakers are not assessed for what they say and how they say it. The language they produced is not analyzed and judged according to a list of criteria. On the other hand, assessment taking place in the classroom is an inseparable part of language learning because when presented appropriately, its character can be highly motivating.

### 5. Types of activities

All speaking activities can be placed on continuum according to whether they are focused on accuracy or fluency. Other factors which decide the activity placement are teacher’s intervention, guidance and instructions. If the objective of an activity is systems, then it is placed on the left. On the contrary, if students practice skills in this case speaking, it is placed on the right side of continuum. For better understanding, view the illustration below.



Pic. 2. Continuum of speaking activities.



Authors Gondová (2010, p. 55-57) and Pokrivčáková (2012, p.92) list these controlled, guided and free speaking activities.

**Controlled activities** – if an activity is controlled it means that the extent of teacher's guidance is very high. The language learners produce is limited. They use only those structures they are asked to use. The objective of controlled activities is accuracy. In other words, right pronunciation, use of vocabulary, grammar or functions.

Examples:

- chorused or individual imitations
- pronunciation drills
- question and answer dialogues
- memorizing situational dialogues
- tongue-twisters rhymes and songs

**Guided activities** – in these activities the language learners produce is freer in comparison with controlled activities. The guidance of the teacher is still present, but is limited.

Examples:

- information gap activities
- questionnaires
- find someone who
- drawing picture according to someone's description
- comparing pictures
- retelling the text

**Free activities** – are characterized by the unpredictability of learners' production due to free use of language. The teacher does not intervene in a sense of absent guidance.

Free activities:

- discussions
- debates
- speeches and presentations (when only topic or a statement is given)
- role plays without rehearsal
- group planning tasks
- problem solving tasks
- projects [2; 9].

Harmer (2001) names the most widely used classroom speaking activities: acting from a script,

communication games, discussion, prepared talks, questionnaires, simulation and role-play [4].

To conclude this section, it is a teacher's role to ensure a wide range of activities. A variety of tasks not only make learners produce a variety of language, but they also keep students motivated. That is why a good teacher should not forget about the variety, balance between controlled, guided and free activities and most importantly the needs of the learners.

### **Conclusion**

Speaking as one of the four language skills should undoubtedly appear in every English classroom to a huge extent. Integration of language systems and skills must be taken into consideration and kept in mind by all teachers and learners. It is rather impossible to master a language if systems and skills are taught and learned in isolation. The sooner they realize and accept the concept, the faster and simpler success comes. Theoretical foundations of speaking from which principals of teaching speaking have been derived must be respected and followed by educators. The quantity of speaking tasks is crucial in developing all speaking sub-skills, but without variety it can bring only limited results and outcomes. By contrast, what all teachers of English language should pay attention to, is the quality and variety of speaking tasks. Without them, no communication success can be guaranteed. Life is not about how much theory graduates have at their disposal, it is about whether and how effectively they are able to apply gained knowledge. Therefore, teachers should create as much space for meaningful and interactive speaking as possible. By creating situations and problems similar to those people in roles of employees, employers, customers, clients, partners, neighbours, friends, acquaintances, competitors and others face in their every day lives, teachers increase their learners' opportunities for a better, more successful and more easily manageable life. After all, teachers do not wish to see their former students struggling; they do not want them to be negatively surprised by the reality; they do not desire to witness their failure, or do they? Every single speaking activity must have a goal. By fulfilling numerous goals of a minor importance, students can reach the ultimate objective of learning English language and that is to become communicatively competent, achieve proficiency and last but not least, develop higher-order thinking skills.

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