

## Building Speaking Skills for English Language Learners

A critical problem for many learners is their poor or inconsistent ability to communicate orally. Often their understanding of grammar, and their reading and writing skills far surpass their speaking skills. They frequently understand much more than they are able to express. Frustrated in their attempts to express their ideas and feelings to others, it is no surprise that many students name speaking skills as their primary need. Why? They need a safe place to practice speaking and to make mistakes.

In one-to-one tutoring sessions, speaking just happens. As you and your student get to know each other, there will be lots to talk about. But, keep in mind that your student needs to speak to others (who are not nearly as patient as you!) when you are not around.

The ability of your student to speak with confidence:

- Helps him to be understood by others.

- Helps him become more credible to others as a result of being understood.

- Builds his ability to understand and use appropriate language for different social settings.

- Develops his independence and self-confidence in a variety of circumstances.

When selecting and designing speaking activities you need to bear in mind your student's language level and, just as important, his real and immediate life circumstances. If you get to know your student well at the beginning and you develop a good rapport, themes and topics will present themselves naturally. Remember the survival themes in every newcomer's life noted above.

The various situations below are ones in which your student will have to speak and be understood:

- Meeting new people and getting acquainted.

- Asking for directions or information.

- Taking phone messages or asking for information over the phone.

- Arranging appointments.

- Dealing with emergencies.

- Applying for a job and preparing for interviews.

Dealing with landlords and superintendents.

Using public transportation.

Dealing with store clerks.

### ***Activities that emphasize speaking***

#### **Role play**

The idea of a role play is to act out and explore language requirements for particular situations. As a follow-up, give your student tasks that require her to enter into the situations simulated in the role plays.

Follow these steps:

1. Before the session, write out a situation and dialogue for the role play. Or look for an existing one on the internet. A job interview is a good example.
2. At the session, have your student read the dialogue. Explain the roles and any relevant cultural points; go over any new vocabulary and key phrases ahead of time. Ensure that she understands how a role play works. The concept of role playing may itself be foreign.
3. Walk through the dialogue together a few times until she feels comfortable with it. Play your assigned roles. Switch roles and play it again.

#### **Discussions**

Some ideas for discussions:

- Describe and interpret pictures and photos.
- Read and discuss a short article from a newspaper.
- Describe objects (qualities, colours, shapes, uses).
- Compare and contrast (objects, pictures, sports, experiences, films, etc.).
- Describe and interpret recorded material (radio advertisements, newscasts, TV shows, etc.).
- Solve dilemmas and survival problems e.g., suppose you lost your wallet and money in a foreign country. What would you do? What five things would you take to a deserted island and why?

- State and support opinions.
- Ask the student to describe things (what makes her happy, what she likes to do, the things she cannot live without, etc.).

### ELL students and the telephone

For many students, from beginner level to advanced, speaking on the phone is particularly difficult. Why? The student has no visual cues to help her understand the conversation. She cannot look at the shape of the speaker's mouth to help distinguish different sounds. She cannot interpret the speaker's gestures and body language. If possible, arrange to speak over the phone regularly or simulate a phone conversation at your tutoring session by facing away from one another while speaking. Practicing with you will help give her confidence.

### *Activities for more advanced students*

It is important to help your more advanced student understand and use appropriate language for different social contexts. Fluent speakers tailor their language to particular social settings, their motives for communicating, and the expectations of others. Our communication functions change as we change social contexts. For instance, we can ask for a cup of coffee in several ways:

- Can I have a coffee, please?
- I'll have a coffee.
- I'd like a coffee please.
- Is there any coffee?

### *Common communication functions*

The ability to understand language functions (how language is used) often indicates a student's level of English fluency. When teaching language functions, you need to explain not only the different ways to express feelings and ideas but also how they relate to various situations or contexts. This can be tricky (it is often something you know intuitively), but it is also a lot of fun. Here are some examples of common communication functions:

- Requesting
- Agreeing and disagreeing
- Interrupting

- Offering and declining offers
- Giving advice
- Stating opinions and arguing
- Apologizing
- Expressing likes and dislikes.

### **Pronunciation**

Improving pronunciation ranks high on many ELL students' wish lists with good reason. Your student obviously wants to be understood when he speaks. He also wants to be seen as credible when talking to a co-worker, employer, or bank teller. Therefore, pay attention to his pronunciation to note where he is having consistent difficulties and look for patterns.

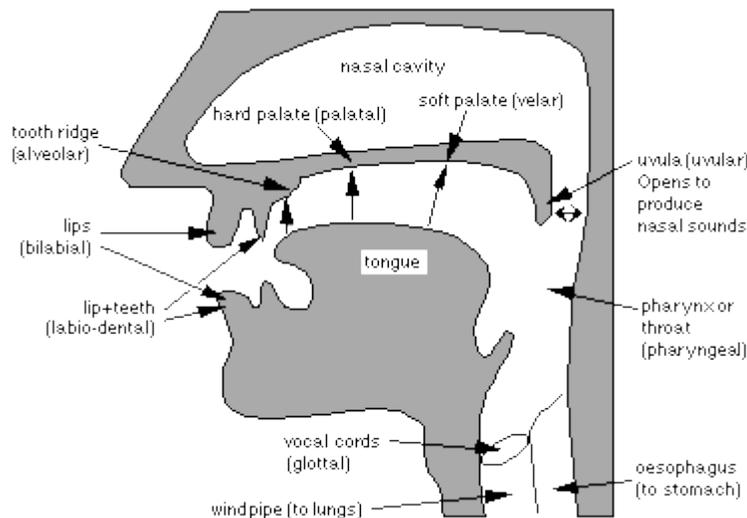
Pronunciation primarily has to do with how to say individual sounds and sound combinations using standard English. There are many more sounds in English than there are letters of the alphabet. More critically for the learner, the English language has many sounds and sound combinations that may not exist in their first language. Thus, the muscles in your student's mouth are not used to producing some English sounds. If you doubt this, try to say words in an unfamiliar language such as Cantonese or Mandarin to a native speaker and watch as they double over in laughter as you mangle it completely. There are very subtle tonal sounds in these languages that most English speakers cannot easily distinguish or reproduce.

Be aware that modifying pronunciation takes time; keeping in mind, improving pronunciation does not mean eradicating a foreign accent. A student's accent is part of her identity. Instead, focus on errors that make your student hard to understand and cause problems with communication. You do not need a degree in phonetics or linguistics to help your student with pronunciation. Here are some ways to get started.

- Use a recorder. It is particularly useful for students to hear both their voice and yours to be able to correct themselves. As well, you can copy the recording from the student to prepare for next week's meeting. Listening to it at home will help you get a handle on her pronunciation strengths and needs.
- Take a small mirror to your sessions. Ask a student who has trouble making either of the "th" sounds (as in that and think) to look in the mirror to check that her tongue is between her teeth. Suppose your student says "tin" instead of "thin". First, check that she can hear and identify the "th" sound. Write tin and thin on a paper. Then you say thin. Ask her to circle the word she hears. If she doesn't hear "th," show her how you make the sound. Exaggerate the sound, and explain the tongue is positioned between

the upper and lower teeth. Now show her that when you make the “t” sound, the tongue touches the roof of the mouth. Now it is her turn to try to make the “th” sound.

- Use a cut-away diagram of the human mouth, with the lips, teeth, tongue and palate (see diagram below) to illustrate the positioning of these to produce specific sounds.



- Use minimal pairs like thin/tin and thanks/tanks to isolate the “t” and “th” sounds. Use common, everyday words your student already knows or uses to distinguish between sounds. Minimal pairs exercises of all types can easily be found on the Internet, including those with online exercises using sound.
- Generate and practice sentences that have the problem sounds such as, “My tall, thin brother took the train to Thunder Bay.”
- Find meaningful contexts in which the sound occurs naturally and make up some conversation topics. For example, write and act out a role play about a visit to the dentist. Insert “th” sounds wherever possible. (“Doctor, I have three sore teeth and a sore throat...”)
- Do not expect instant results. Do not interrupt to correct her every time she mispronounces the sound. Encourage her to listen to herself and self-correct whenever possible.

Other key aspects of pronunciation include:

**Intonation:** The pattern of rise and fall of the pitch of a sentence. For example, in English our pitch rises at the end of a question to indicate that the sentence is a question or drops when stating a fact.

**Stress:** Emphasis on a particular syllable or word: **refuse**; **refuse**; **Where** are you going? Where are **you** going?

**Rhythm:** The sense of flow in speech, marked by the stress and timing of syllables in words and sentences.

**Linking:** The blending together of words within the same phrase or sentence, so that there is a seamless transition from one word to the next, i.e., "How'reyadoin'?"