

Time and the management of speaking tasks

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

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

Planning time

Speaking in another language is difficult and it has been argued that an important reason for this is that a student's attentional resources during a speaking activity are limited (Skehan, 1998: 73). They cannot give equal attention to the competing demands of thinking of something to say, getting their meaning across in real time (fluency), using language accurately and appropriately (accuracy), and using varied and more advanced language

(complexity). Attempting to do so may lead some students to experience cognitive overload (Goh & Burns, 2012: 246) and anxiety as a result. In order to make the students' task more manageable, it will be necessary to 'park' one or more of these demands, so that the limited attentional resources can be appropriately directed. To some extent, all of the work that comes before a speaking activity can be seen as support and preparation for the speaking itself and should help to lessen cognitive overload. This preparatory work needs, of course, to be at the appropriate level of challenge. However, in this section, we will consider the time set aside for planning and preparation immediately before the speaking activity.



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

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

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

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

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

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