# Improving Speaking Skills

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**Abstract**

This article examines the different circumstances under which infant and adult learners develop speaking skills. We will see the facilities or difficulties in both cases in order to focus on the real possibilities of adults to develop a high level of speaking proficiency. We will see what the role of the teacher is in order to improve the learners' skills, the features of oral communication that need to be improved and which strategies can be used to overcome the difficulties.

   **Key words**: speaking skills, adult learning, oral communication, teaching strategies.

**Resumen**

Este artículo analiza las diferentes circunstancias en las que niños y adultos desarrollan las destrezas orales. Veremos las facilidades y dificultades en ambos casos para así centrarnos en las posibilidades reales que tienen los adultos de alcanzar un alto nivel de competencia oral. Veremos también cual es el papel del profesor en este contexto, para mejorar las capacidades de los alumnos, y ver cuáles son los elementos de la comunicación oral que hay que mejorar y qué estrategias se pueden aplicar para superar las dificultades.

   **Palabras clave**: destrezas orales, aprendizaje de adultos, comunicación verbal, estrategias de enseñanza.

If we think of the period in our lives when we learned to speak our first language, and the moment in which we started to make huge efforts to speak our second/foreign language we find significant differences. In the former case, we may have fond memories of what our parents told us; and in the latter, it suddenly becomes a frustrating experience that seems to bring imperfect results. For adults, learning to speak a new language is in many cases far from satisfactory simply because they feel they need to cope with many different aspects at one time, and that seems to be impossible in real conversations. I wonder if it is possible to acquire a high level of speaking proficiency in adults; I wonder if it is possible to make adult learners improve their speaking skills, and the most important thing for teachers: how?

   The first question we have to consider in order to reach a conclusion is whether learning at infancy is different from learning at adulthood; which are the circumstances that differentiate them and if those conditions inevitably lead to obvious and hopeless results. Only bearing in mind what we can expect of a particular type of learner, we can focus on how to improve their speaking skills.

   It is obvious that there are marked differences between children learners and adult learners and that they cannot acquire the second language under the same circumstances. Consequently, the results will be also different. Concerning children and the early age at which they learn to speak, we can say that they enjoy certain advantages that make them outstanding learners. They have surprising linguistic abilities due to optimal moment in which they find themselves for language learning, this is to say, at this moment their brain is characterized by a certain plasticity that allows some abilities to develop with ease during a period of time, after which it becomes really difficult for these abilities to be developed (Fleta, 2006: 53), or using

Klein's words 'between the age of two and puberty the human brain shows the plasticity which allows a child to acquire his first language' (Klein, 1986: 9). Therefore, children are special learners for their natural and innate abilities to acquire a language. According to Fleta, one of these special abilities is 'filtering sophisticated information about language properties from birth' (Fleta, 2006: 49), in other words, children have an enormous ability to integrate difficult information in an easy and unconscious way from the beginning of their development. They are able to acquire and integrate complex data without being aware of it, whereas other learners, at other ages, would find it arduous to achieve. Moreover, apart from this special gift children have for assimilating difficult information, we can mention some of their other qualities, such as their capacity for perceiving and imitating sounds. Some studies have showed that 'young infants are especially sensitive to acoustic changes at the phonetic boundaries between categories' (Kuhl, 2004: 832). Also, children are especially good at predicting syllable chunks: 'infants are sensitive to the sequential probabilities between adjacent syllables' (Kuhl, 2004: 834) which makes children with a surprising instinct as far as language knowledge is concerned . Finally, students also acquire the ability of ordering words within a sentence (grammar rules) unconsciously: 'there is some evidence that young children can detect non-adjacencies such as those required to learn grammar' (Kuhl, 2004: 836). All in all, we can say that children learn the language without being aware of it when they 'are exposed to the right kind of auditory information' (Kuhl, 2004: 836), this is, children learn the language through communication and interaction and thanks to that they acquire all the abilities they can potentially develop.

On the other hand, concerning adults we observe how difficult is that they can acquire certain native sounds; their pronunciation will be, on many occasions, foreign-like which is due to their difficulty in distinguishing and producing some sounds after the so called 'critical period'. In that respect, some authors claim that adult learners cannot acquire a phonological development (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 69). However, other researchers defend the opposite. Wolfgang Klein, in his book *Second Language Acquisition* (1986) stated that 'the apparent facility with which children learn a second language is often attributed to biological factors, but an alternative explanation might be that, unlike adults, children have no need to fear the loss of their social identity' (Klein, 1986: 6). Authors such as Klein argue that phonological facilities of children are not bound to biological reasons, but to psychological ones. In that respect, adults feel attached to their native identities, to their original social identities, which is what prevent them from achieving perfection in L2 pronunciation. Klein confirmed that 'suitably motivated adults are capable of mastering to perfection the pronunciation of the most exotic languages' (Klein, 1986: 10). Therefore, we conclude that although the cases of adults speaking a second language without any accent are not very common, this does not mean that it is impossible to acquire a native-like pronunciation. Also, besides phonological issues, we can talk about the capacity of adults to acquire any other kind of linguistic faculties, more related to structural relations (UG). In that sense, there are authors that doubt the validity of Lenneberg's Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) by assuring that even adults have access to the well known Universal Grammar. While Lenneberg claimed that only before puberty learners had UG available, authors such as S. W. Felix defended by evidence that adult L2 learners also benefit from the UG principles: 'If child and adult learners use different modules for the purpose of language acquisition, then we would expect adult learners to be unable to attain grammatical knowledge that arises only through the mediation of UG. If, in contrast, adults do attain this type of knowledge, then, we have reason to believe that UG continues to be active even after puberty' (Felix, 1988: 279).  Therefore, we can conclude that adults are also able to master a proficient use of the second/foreign language, not only in grammatical issues but also in phonological ones, which makes us believe that we can improve adult learners' speaking skills.

Once we know that adults can be biologically and psychologically prepared to have a native-like proficiency in the second language, we should move on to the second language teaching context in order to achieve our aim of improving adult learners' skills. In that respect, we should reflect on the teachers' role in this situation and what they can do to be successful with their learners. Teachers therefore need to analyse the students' needs, face their problems and find fruitful solutions that help them develop their speaking abilities. S. Pit Corder, in his chapter called 'Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching', in *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (1973) defended the important role of linguists who identify the problems of the learners and find solutions for them. Corder added that specialists' role is to formulate the appropriate questions in order to define problems that need to be faced. Using his words, 'the formulation of the questions, the identification of the problems and the specification of their nature presupposes linguistic theory. The nature of the problem is defined by the theory which is applied to it. The solution to a problem is only as good as the theory which has been used to solve it' (Corder, 1973: 138). In this direction he said that in language teaching there are two appropriate questions teachers should make: *what to teach* and *how to teach,* 'these are the problems of content and method, or, using an industrial analogy, the problem of product and process design respectively' (Corder, 1973: 139). Therefore, if teachers wish to know how to improve speaking skills, what they need to ask themselves first is what they are going to teach, and how.

On the one hand, let us consider the first question: *what*. If we need to improve speaking skills we need to know which skills or which features learners need to develop. In that respect, there are several authors that stated different goals or different dimensions that speakers needed to achieve. Goodwin, for instance, established several goals for a proper pronunciation. She called them 'functional intelligibility, functional communicability, increased self-confidence, and speech-monitoring abilities' (Goodwin, 2001: 118). She argued that learners should be able to speak an intelligible foreign language, that is to say, listeners need to understand the learner's message without huge efforts; learners also need to be successful in a 'specific communicative situation' (Goodwin, 2001: 118); they need to 'gain confidence in their ability to speak and be understood' (Goodwin, 2001: 118); and finally, they need to monitor and control their own production by paying attention to their own speech. Goodwin specified those abilities that learners need to acquire through certain linguistic features that can be practiced: Intonation, rhythm, reduced speech, linking words, consonants and vowel sounds, word stress, etc. These are concrete speaking aspects in which learners should be trained in order to improve their speaking skills.

Similarly, other authors such as Anne Lazaraton suggest that oral communication is based on four dimensions or competences: grammatical competence (phonology, vocabulary, word and sentence formation…); sociolinguistic competence (rules for interaction, social meanings); discourse competence (cohesion and how sentences are liked together); and finally, strategic competence (compensatory strategies to use in difficult situations), (Lazaraton, 2001: 104). According to Lazaraton learners should develop all these abilities to acquire a high oral level of the foreign language, but she adds that in recent years, with the influence of the communicative approach, more importance is given to fluency, trying to achieve a balance with the traditional accuracy.

Moreover, apart from what pedagogically and theoretically should be taught, many researchers are presently analysing real problems that learners face: 'fluent speech contains reduced forms, such as contractions, vowel reduction, and elision, where learners do not get sufficient practice' (Lazaraton, 2001: 103); use of slang and idioms in speech since students tend to sound 'bookish' (Lazaraton, 2001: 103), stress, rhythm, intonation, lack of active vocabulary, lack of interaction pattern rules…

Once speaking goals have been determined, next step consists of questioning *how* they are going to be achieved. For designing a concrete methodology teachers need to adopt a theoretical perspective, they need to reflect on the linguistic approach that will be used in their teaching. Many authors, following the up-to-date trend of the Communicative approach, defend the interactive role of speaking and promote its teaching from a communicative perspective stressing meaning and context. In Goodwin's words: 'In "Teaching Pronunciation" the goal of instruction is threefold: to enable our learners to understand and be understood, to build their confidence in entering communicative situations, and to enable them to monitor their speech' (Goodwin, 2001: 131), also 'pronunciation is never an end in itself but a means of negotiating meaning in discourse, embedded in specific sociocultural and interpersonal contexts' (Goodwin,2001: 117).

If we think of how this theoretical background will be applied in real teaching, we find that in traditional classes they focused speaking practice on the production of single and isolated sounds, whereas within the communicative approach, 'the focus shifted to fluency rather than accuracy, encouraging an almost exclusive emphasis on suprasegmentals' (Goodwin, 2001: 117). There is the key word, when communication is the main goal linguistic practice turns into longer structures, at the suprasegmental level; therefore, the training on individual sounds makes way for macro structures that affect interaction directly.

The second part of *how to teach,* moves away from theory to approach real problems and their solutions. Several authors have stated that when learners face problems in speaking they need practical and concrete solutions to know how to behave and respond in order to overcome those difficulties. Mariani, in his article 'Developing Strategic Competence: Towards Autonomy in Oral Interaction'*,* recalls L1 strategies that native speakers use when they encounter communication problems, and suggests teaching those strategies to L2 learners: 'just think of how often, in L1 communication, we cannot find the words to say something and have to adjust our message, or to ask our interlocutor to help us, or to use synonyms or general words to make ourselves understood' (Mariani, 1994: 1). Mariani classifies those strategies according to the speakers' behaviour: learners can either avoid certain messages because they don't feel confident with their speaking skills ('reduction strategies'), or make the most out of their knowledge and modify their message bearing in mind their weaknesses and strengths ('achievement strategies': borrowing, foreignizing, translating…(Mariani, 1994: 3). The author praises the latter by saying that achievement strategies are a very interesting way of developing learners' language domain. Speakers who opt for this option make huge efforts to transmit a message by playing with the language to the extreme, which only brings beneficial consequences.

In the second or foreign language classroom context, teachers should train learners to use and practice the different strategies that can help them face difficult situations. The only way of training students in this direction is by means of a bank of activities in which they become aware of the different possibilities that they can put into practice. Authors such as Goodwin or Lazaraton offer a varied list of exercises to be used in class: poems, rhymes, dialogues, monologues, role plays, debates, interviews, simulations, drama scenes, discussions, conversations…

Therefore, coming back to the initial question proposed above, I think it is absolutely feasible to teach adults strategies to improve their speaking skills. Of course, that objective depends on many different factors that will affect the degree of acquisition, let us think of age, motivation, or even the context in which the language is learned: ESL versus EFL. In that respect, learners in a second language context will have numberless occasions to practice the language and that will undoubtedly influence their skills development. With reference to the foreign language context, authors such as Lazaraton admitted the difficulties learners

normally face: 'homogeneous EFL classes, where all students speak the same first language and English is not used outside the classroom, present certain additional challenges for the teacher' (Lazaraton, 2001: 110). As she said, teachers have considerable limitations in EFL classes such as  lack of opportunities to use the language, lack of motivation in the learners, the number of students in the class, curriculum restrictions…(Lazaraton, 2001: 110), but there are solutions and strategies, as the ones previously mentioned, that should be put into practice.

Mariani, in his article mentioned above*,* also makes a reflection on whether communication strategies should be teachable or not. He states the pros and cons by saying that training students on specific strategies can provide them with certain limitations and consequently hamper fluent communication: 'we can hardly force them into a straightjacket of pre-selected strategies […] Most of us would agree that we should encourage spontaneity, creativity and originality in language use' (Mariani, 1994: 7). However, on the other hand, he argues that if learners become aware of the different strategies they can flexibly use, they will finally integrate them either consciously or unconsciously, which will stretch their possibilities for communication.

To sum up, as teachers can, and should, improve learners' speaking skills and communication strategies, the only thing they need to do is to plan their teaching around two main questions: what they want to teach, which specific speaking features they want to develop in their learners; and how they want to do it.

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