Chapter 4

Reinforcing Grammar and Vocabulary Learning With High-Volume Speaking Activities

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INTRODUCTION

Volume, according to Ur, is “the sheer amount of comprehensible language that is spoken, heard, or written in the course of an activity” (1987, p. 12). In other words, it is what English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) teachers want to get their students producing in class. All students in a classroom can read, write, or listen simultaneously. This ability is not so straightforward when it comes to classroom speaking. When a teacher elicits spoken responses for students—one at a time—it is hardly a speaking task at all. We would not ask just one student to listen to a recording, or one student to read or write while the others observed. Individual student talk is not an efficient use of class time.

As a new English teacher working overseas, I realized my speaking tasks did not offer learners much language practice. I had to reassess their design to increase the volume of language that students produced while maintaining accuracy. My goal was to create a set of focused high-volume speaking tasks. Through lengthy experimentation, I developed six keys for making a successful fluency task embedded in a focus on forms.

1. Put Students in Pairs or Small Groups

The only way to significantly increase talk time in class is to get students talking to one another. When students are arranged in pairs, half of the class can be talking simultaneously. A conversation between two people may be the most common or natural arrangement for language exchange (Norman, Levihn, & Hedenquist, 1986).
2. Scaffold Language With Prompts

The speaking tasks in this chapter employ prompts or cue cards that are distributed to each student. These visual references—whether in a handout or written on the board—function as speaking aids, providing students with content information and linguistic patterns to assist them when talking. Simply put, they scaffold, or guide, the conversation, thereby enabling most students to produce a satisfactory volume of talk focused on target forms.

3. Model Activities

Speaking tasks should be demonstrated in front of the whole class. A pair of students can run through a task together briefly. Modeling helps to avoid confusion about task requirements that can deflate motivation. That is, modeling acts as a secondary scaffold by clarifying the directions of the activity and, in turn, supports the linguistic and/or content cues that form the primary scaffold. Student modeling of activities allows teachers to spot potential problems before the task is underway.

4. Allow Students Time to Prepare

Students will benefit from some preparation time to examine the models on which they will base their speech. Once they receive their prompts, give them time to think them over, discuss any words they may not know with peers, rehearse language in their heads, or write notes. Folse (2006) finds that even the most reticent students are more likely to speak after they have had a chance to put something into writing.

5. Tell Students to Continue Talking

Students may be afraid of making mistakes or of learning bad habits from their partners. Emphasize that this speaking practice is primarily intended to make them more comfortable and confident in expressing ideas in English as they practice conversational usage of language introduced in class. One way to keep them talking is by setting time limits. Students in pairs or small groups can experience what Ur describes as “pleasurable tension” (1987, p. 23) when faced with a limited time. When they know their speaking time is limited, learners may push themselves to speak.

6. Encourage Variations

After running through an activity, teachers might wish to demonstrate variations of the model. Since high-volume speaking practice is the primary goal, do not discourage conversations that wander from the guidelines you provide. Students can learn a good deal by experimenting with the language. Time permitting, students should practice the tasks more than once with different partners, and the scaffold of language support can be taken away or scaled back. Remember that fluency is the goal of high-volume speaking practice, so avoid interruptions. As
Brown and Yule pointed out, even native speakers “don’t produce ideal strings of complete, perfectly formed, sentences . . .” (1983, p. 21), so we should not insist our students do likewise.

**CONTEXT**

The critical incident that piqued my interest in the fluency–accuracy nexus in teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) was a particular class session I taught in 1997. It was my first term teaching at a private school in the Republic of Moldova. I assumed that off-the-cuff exchanges were natural and useful in conversation classes and spent the entire 80-minute class eliciting individual responses from 16 preintermediate, young adult students. It was a “communicative” school, after all, and to me at the time, this seemed like a communicative lesson—based as it was on real talk, not on grammar or drills.

Reflecting on this, I cringe at the thought of those students sitting patiently through this teacher-centered exercise. I had provided absolutely no platform for students in the class to practice speaking English. Several extroverted students dominated the session, while those who were shy—or simply needed time to formulate their thoughts—were left out.

According to Cotton (2001), teacher wait-time—the pause a teacher allows after asking a question—is often a second or less, and students who are perceived as slow are routinely given the least thinking time of all. Furthermore, teacher-guided question sessions cause competition among certain students to perform for the teacher, and there is little indication in these cases that students listen to each other (Rowe, 1986).

In the lesson I describe here, many of my Moldovan students were content to nod, hoping I would take this as a signal of involvement. Later, I decided that if ever I was going to call something a “speaking task,” it had better involve a lot of speaking time for all students. This decision resulted in a professional development challenge that started my experimentation with various speaking tasks.

**CURRICULUM, TASKS, MATERIALS**

Since the school in Moldova promoted the communicative approach, teachers were supposed to facilitate lots of talking. Yet, at the same time, our curriculum was based entirely on syntactic structures: Level 1 equaled present and simple past; Level 2 equaled irregular past, present progressive; Level 3 equaled present perfect; and so on. I thought that if I was going to give my students the confidence to communicate and practice specific structures, I needed speaking activities that targeted precisely those structures and offered students ample practice time. I soon discovered that increasing the volume of oral production using focused speaking tasks was more involved than simply putting students into groups.
I describe two sample activities in this chapter. The first targets a grammatical structure: the third-person singular. The second provides fluency practice focused on a lexical item, the verb *had better*. Linguistic targets for each activity are guided, or scaffolded, by cue card language prompts.

**The Use of Prompts**

Whenever someone asks me what my favorite film is, I draw a blank. That question is just too broad. If, however, someone handed me a list of 10 famous films, I am certain I would have opinions on all of them, comparisons and perhaps a ranking would emerge, and a conversation would begin.

As noted in the introduction, one key to increased speaking in the ESOL classroom is providing some form of written reference (prompts) on which students may model their language. These prompts may be handouts featuring unfinished sentences, questions, controversial statements, lists, charts, pictures, maps, or game boards. Once students have exhausted their ideas on the first question or topic listed on a prompt—and this may be only a matter of seconds—they can refer to it again for their next cue. The reference aids I have used can be described as one type of scaffolding for speaking tasks: the provision of visual and graphic language support for learners (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). With strong reference aids, students have the opportunity for “uninhibited practice” (Ellis, 1985, p. 161), free from close teacher monitoring. Ideally, as well, reference aids should develop from the shared interests of instructors and students alike, based upon common experience (Stewart, 1997, citing Bonwell & Eison, 1991).

The following sample activities that I outline are based on prompts that scaffold much of the language—both vocabulary and structure—that students will practice during the speaking task.

**Activity 1: Name Three Things**

**Objective:** Reinforcement of grammar structures

It is often the case that classroom grammar exercises (i.e., drills) are independent of speaking activities. Focused grammar practice through talking is rare, especially when it is high-volume speaking. Yet, it is possible, even simple, to take any syntactic form and provide models through which students can practice the structure orally. In the activity Name Three Things, students use a high amount of repetition by producing examples of the structure again and again (see Ur, 1987). In the following example, students speak in pairs, focusing on the third-person verb forms. Each partner receives one of the following two handouts (see Figure 1). After going over the instructions with students, the teacher should do one or two demonstrations with the entire class so that students are clear on the process involved.

Name Three Things is a noisy activity, where each student may produce up to 36 sentences using the third-person singular in 5 minutes or so—a high amount
of repetition. Granted, at the basic level this is not particularly meaningful communication, but students are allowed to frame their own answers and use their imaginations. It can easily be made more communicative by encouraging students to ask for reasons (“Why do you say that?”) to support their response.

Teachers should not monitor accuracy. The prompt cards themselves provide the focus on form, while the output produced allows learners to test hypotheses about how the target language works (Swain, 1985). The primary goal of these

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### Name Three Things a Person Does (Partner #1)

**Directions:** Face your partner. Take turns asking what a person does on these occasions or at these places. You may choose any square. Then say, for instance, “Name three things a person does in a movie theater.”

Your partner will answer, “He watches movies. He eats popcorn. Sometimes he falls asleep.”

Bravo. Your partner has completed that square. Mark an X through it. See which of you can get the most Xs in 5 minutes.

**Note:** Your partner has different subjects than you, so listen carefully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>in prison</th>
<th>on a cruise</th>
<th>at the circus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in Paris</td>
<td>at a picnic</td>
<td>when she’s tired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in a train station</td>
<td>with a cat</td>
<td>at a wedding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>on her day off</td>
<td>in front of a mirror</td>
<td>on New Year’s Eve</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Name Three Things a Person Does (Partner #2)

**Directions:** Face your partner. Take turns asking what a person does on these occasions or at these places. You may choose any square. Then say, for instance, “Name three things a person does in a movie theater.”

Your partner will answer, “He watches movies. He eats popcorn. Sometimes he falls asleep.”

Bravo. Your partner has completed that square. Mark an X through it. See which of you can get the most Xs in 5 minutes.

**Note:** Your partner has different subjects than you, so listen carefully.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>when he’s in love</th>
<th>at the beach</th>
<th>after dinner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>when she has a cold</td>
<td>when she’s angry</td>
<td>in a church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>before he goes to bed</td>
<td>on Valentine’s day</td>
<td>in fairy tales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when he’s got no money</td>
<td>when she’s scared</td>
<td>on an airplane</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Figure 1. Oral Grammar Practice Handout*
high-volume speaking tasks is to provide guided speaking practice that encourages students to think both in and about the language.

**Activity 2: Checklist Talking—Had Better**

**Objective: Practice of lexical items**

In the school where I taught in Moldova, auxiliary verbs such as *had better*, *supposed to*, and *would rather* appeared at a specific point in the curriculum. My upper-intermediate students in Moldova completed written drills on these forms handily. I felt frustrated, however, because there was never any textbook exercise incorporating these useful verbs into speaking practice. Given this materials gap, I wondered how my students could incorporate them into their own English. The answer I found was to create speaking tasks based on the target vocabulary.

Whether the additional speaking practice on targeted vocabulary hastened students’ acquisition, I couldn’t say. But the alternative of merely following the assigned text was not an option for me. I had come to believe in the retentive value that oral practice has for the acquisition of lexical and syntactic items. Ellis (1997a) supports the view that long-lasting effects may “occur only when learners have subsequent opportunities to hear and use the target structure in communication” (p. 83).

For this task, I wrote up a series of questions involving modals. The result is illustrated in Figure 2. The task is open-ended, meaning learners can express their own opinions using the targeted form *had better*. Understandably, teacher-created questions may not always be of equal interest to all students, so I try to supply more than they will need for the task. In this way, the Checklist Talking activity gives students a degree of choice.

**REFLECTIONS**

There’s a reason people ask, “Do you speak English?” and not “Do you read English?” or “Do you understand English?” or “Do you know English grammar?” For most second language learners, the real reward to studying a second or foreign language is in speaking. My school in Moldova hoped to emphasize that aspect of language learning through a highly structured curriculum focused on forms. My job, as I saw it, was to facilitate fluency practice in lessons.

As an inexperienced teacher, my first attempts at fluency tasks involved broad topics and lots of time with students focused on the teacher. That was the arrangement in each and every foreign language class I had ever attended myself, so that was the image I had of classroom language instruction. Then, I shifted to having my students face each other, rather than the front of the class. I began to engage them in timed conversations that were simple but focused on forms.

The high-volume speaking activities that I described in this chapter do not always demand the use of high-order thinking skills, and they are not meant to replace other communicative speaking tasks. Their purpose is twofold: first, to
supplement and reinforce written drills and themes covered in a curriculum and, second, to increase the volume of speaking in class.

Incorporating focused fluency tasks in lessons does not involve a new approach to teaching, or a restructuring of the curriculum. It can be done by pairing or grouping students and giving them appropriate prompts and models to keep them talking. Most students, like mine in Moldova, wish to become competent English speakers. To help them achieve this goal, I urge ESOL professionals to conceive more ways of building both fluency and accuracy through speaking tasks.

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Figure 2. Lexical Practice Handout