
Chapter 9

Teaching Spoken English

by
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Introduction

There was an old teacher from Shinas,
Who never played games with his class.
He neither sang nor he spoke,
And rarely awoke,
To see there was no one in class.
(Penrose, 1986)

Speaking is the target skill in both first and foreign languages. Developing the ability to speak orally to another person is a source of motivation for most learners of foreign languages. Of all the four skills, speaking seems to be the most important, since people who know a language are said to be "speakers" of that language (Ur, 1997). However, developing children's speaking skills is a real challenge for many EFL primary teachers in Egypt. This is due to the fact that:

- Egyptian children do not live in an English environment and most of them attend schools where English is taught as a curricular subject. In this context, it becomes very difficult to achieve good standards of spoken English since the input that children receive may be insufficient.
- Children have few opportunities to hear English spoken outside the classroom. This means that the teacher has to provide the children with all their experiences of spoken English.

Thus, it becomes important to give children as many opportunities to listen to and speak English in the classroom as possible. Let us look at the following story of an EFL primary stage teacher to recognize the challenge of teaching spoken English to children at the primary level.

Mounira is an EFL teacher at El-Bustan Primary School. Mounira's main problem is that her students have great difficulty contributing to EFL speaking activities. She describes her students as reluctant to participate in EFL speaking activities. Mounira diagnoses the main reasons for her pupils' limited speaking skills as follows:

- shyness
- lack of appropriate language (vocabulary and structures)
- fear of making mistakes
- lack of confidence
- having nothing to say.

Mounira wonders how she can overcome these problems.

This chapter will help you, Mounira, and other EFL teachers to overcome such problems in your primary classrooms. It will help you think about the most important functions or uses of language for children. Then, it will explore ways for creating a more communicative classroom environment and help you get ideas about appropriate types of communicative speaking activities for children. Following that, this chapter will address the issue of assessing speaking skills.

Children's Language Functions

When studying the ways that children use language across cultures, linguists have found it useful to look at the ways in which children use language generally. These "uses" or language functions occur in children's earliest speech and continue to persist as children develop grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing skills. Because these functions are so compelling in children's first languages, we may assume that the same functions drive them to use language in a foreign language classroom, given an environment that fosters language development.

There are several descriptions of language functions in the literature. The functions described by Shafer, Staab, and Smith (1983) were created with teachers and the classroom setting in mind and have relevance to a discussion of learning language in a classroom setting. Shafer et al. (1983) describe five functions of children's language. Let's look at what they are and how we can encourage children to use these functions to speak in classrooms.

Children Use Language to Assert and Maintain Social Needs

All language use is social, but children initiate speaking to assert their social needs and opinions. Young children quickly learn to say "*Mine*," when a favorite toy is taken away from them. School age children use expressions such as "*It's not fair!*" while playing games. They use positive expressions to express their opinions: "*Oh how pretty*", "*I like that one*". The social function of language continues and develops during the school years as children learn the language of social discourse, aimed at keeping conversations flowing: "*Really?*" "*That's right!*" "*Of course!*"

In the foreign language classroom, the social function of language is promoted when we teach children simple games that require them to interact in a social setting. Later in this chapter, some typical games will be described.

Children Use Language to Project into Novel Situations

The child's world is a world of make-believe. Play is an important part of that world. Children, early on, begin to use language to pretend, to project themselves into imaginary roles. When children change the pitch of their voices and their manner of speaking, they are using this "projection" function of language.

In the classroom, role play, dialogues, puppets, and plays all tap into this

function of language. By level four of primary school, children are capable of projecting themselves outside of their own experiences (Piper, 1998) and into the experiences of people from other cultures, even the cultural contexts of people who use the English language.

Children Use Language for Controlling the Self and Others

Children use language to direct others' actions, to request directions for completing a task, for seeking attention through commands "*Take this,*" "*What do we do next?*" "*Look at me.*" This is the language of getting the task finished, getting the job done (Piper, 1998). This function of language is appropriate for school tasks. The language needed to complete a writing activity, finish a project with another student, and confirm the directions with the teacher are all a part of this function.

In the classroom, we can tap into this natural language function by teaching children the language of commands through "directional routines" and Total Physical Response sequences. The game of Simon Says (see Chapter 5: *Games for Language Learning*) models the language of commands: "*Stand up*" "*Sit down.*" We can further increase the probability of the use of this function in English if we create buddy pairs in our classrooms. Sometimes called "Learning Buddies," these student duos work together to accomplish tasks that the teacher has carefully created to promote language use. An example is the teacher who "buddies up" her students to practice the exercise in *Hello! Book 1*, Unit 16. As the teacher holds up pictures of different foods or articles of clothing, the pupils say:

1st child: Give me the jacket.

2nd Child: Take the jacket.

1st child: Give me the ice cream.

2nd child: Take the ice cream.

After the first round of pictures, the "buddies" can exchange their roles.

Children Use Language to Inform

This function is a very important one for children to develop if they are to succeed in school (Piper, 1998). It is a natural function for "school talk." Children label (*That's a toad*), describe events (*First we ask the questions, then we write our answers*), describe details (*It's long and thin and has big ears*), compare (*The red one is prettier than the blue one*), make generalizations based upon known facts (*It has scales so it's a reptile*), and request information (*What do you call this?*) (Piper, 1998). This is the language that children use to learn about the world.

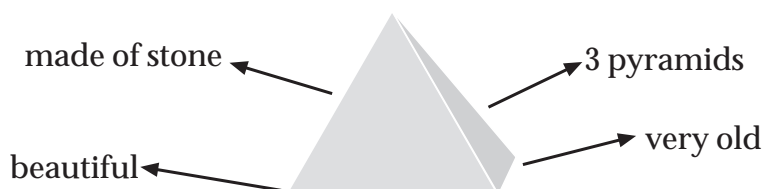
We encourage this language in the classroom when we teach children how to label their environment "That's a pen," "That's a pencil." Vocabulary learning lies at the heart of the informing function. Closely related, and occurring a little later in the learning cycle, is the ability to report. We help children to develop this skill when we provide opportunities for reporting to others about information that is unknown to the listener. Interviews of other children and family members are one technique we can use to accomplish this. *Hello! Book 1*, Unit 14 provides a model for interviewing other children about their families:

1st child: How many brothers have you got?

2nd child: I've got two brothers.

We can also help children to report on information that may be known to the entire class. This kind of reporting is typical of "school language." Teachers ask questions when they already know the answer, "How much is five times three?" *Hello! Book 1*, Unit 23 is one example of how we can help our pupils learn the language of reporting. In this lesson, a child tells a tourist facts about the pyramids. If we use buddy pairs and a graphic organizer, the children can role play this situation, adding more information if they wish.

Facts About the Pyramids



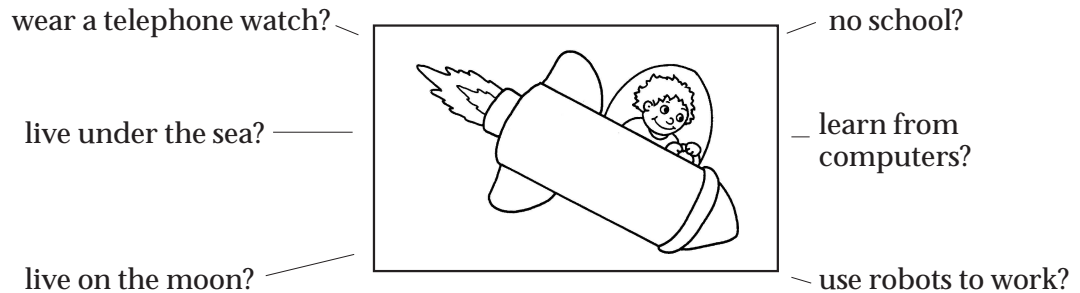
Children Use Language to Forecast and Reason

This function of language is also directly related to school success. Forecasting events in language is related to predicting events while reading or listening. Reasoning language helps children to "figure out" how and why things happen in the world. This function is also related to the child's natural curiosity about the world. All through their primary years children are driven by curiosity to learn more.

We can take advantage of children's curiosity by planning our lessons around real world events and information. *Hello! 2*, Unit 18 focuses on the world of outer space. Children predict "What will life be like in the future?" Because our pupils know real world information about this topic, are curious about it, and enjoy using their imaginations, this is an opportunity to encourage the children to make predictions in simple English. We need to support their efforts with available vocabulary (perhaps lists of words on chart paper) and

graphic organizers for collecting the information and keeping it available for language practice.

The World of the Future



Children's normal speech functions will promote their speaking skills in English if the classroom environment is favorable. Let's talk now about a favorable classroom environment.

Classroom Organization and Speaking Skills

We have learned from research into second language learning, from the communicative competence movement, from experience with immersion programs and from content-based instruction that foreign language classrooms need to adopt an organizing principle based upon meaningful communication in the context of a holistic approach to learning (Curtain & Pesola, 1994). The grammatical focus that dominated foreign language classrooms for many years has been replaced by an emphasis on using language for real purposes in real contexts. Today, language correctness is not as important as authentic and meaningful purpose. This new focus is most important for children's foreign language instruction. We know that children are often not as motivated to learn foreign languages as adults. They see no real purpose for the practice, drill and memorization involved. The challenge for the foreign language teacher of primary children is to create a classroom environment where language is used meaningfully and purposefully.

Pair and group work is essential for this kind of communication, especially in large classes of forty or fifty students. These "buddy group" experiences will promote our pupils' speaking skills if we ensure that activities involve a

real exchange of information. Interactive small group work often lessens children's anxiety about speaking. It is usually more interesting and motivating for learners. (See Chapter 21: *Cooperative Learning in Language Classrooms* for more ideas about grouping.)

Teachers of primary children need to be tolerant of their pupils' errors in the initial stages of speech. We know that speech, unlike writing, allows the child no time to reflect or edit the language. Speech is characterized by false starts and hesitations, phrases rather than complete sentences and incomplete utterances of many kinds. Speech is often supported by a context that completes the utterance. Gestures, pictures, body language, and situational context provide a great deal of meaningful input to the listener. These conditions do not exist for the written word. As a result, we need not demand perfection from our pupils' first speech. We can trust that, with time, their abilities will grow and accuracy will develop.

Activities that Encourage Students to Speak

The learning activities we choose for our young pupils will determine how efficiently they begin to speak in English. It is assumed that teachers will integrate these activities into the content topic of the lesson. If we are learning about animals in *Hello!*, for example, we will play a game with animal-related vocabulary. We will want to use a variety of activities in the classroom in order to keep the children's attention and to reach the different learning styles of our pupils. In addition, we will want to support learning by providing many "scaffolds" during the lesson: context clues as to the meaning of the language. These scaffolds include charts, pictures, gestures, the blackboard, the overhead projector, real objects, the text book, vocalizations, pantomimes, graphic organizers, diagrams, and anything else we can think of to communicate meaning to our pupils.

Games

When teaching beginners, game-like activities can motivate students to speak, even if they can produce only a few words. (See Chapter 5: *Games for Language Learning* for more game ideas). An example is found in *Hello! I Unit 3*. Here, the children are blindfolded while they try to identify a classmate.

1st child: "You're Dina".

2nd child: "No, I'm Nabil".

Routine labeling activities can become games. For example, in *Hello! 1*, Unit 4, the teacher might put the wrong cue card on an item, e.g., the word "a table" on a chair. The teacher can then ask, "Is this a table?" Students will answer, "No, it's a chair".

Another example of a game that helps children to practice *Yes/No* questions and answers is the game in *Hello! 1*, Unit 11. This game is sometimes called "I'm Thinking."

1st child: I'm thinking about something beginning with "f". What is it?

2nd child: Is it a fish?

3rd child: Is it a finger?

Guessing Activities

Doff (1988) suggests guessing games:

1. **Guess the sentence:** The teacher writes a sentence on a piece of paper or card. The sentence is hidden, but the basic structure is written on the blackboard to provide context for the guessing: *I went to ___ to ___*. The children can guess the right sentence by asking questions like: "Did you go to school?"
2. **Mime:** The teacher calls pupils to the front and secretly gives them a sentence, written on a piece of paper, that describes an activity. The pupils mime the activity, e.g., climbing a ladder. The other pupils try to guess the situation by asking questions.

Information Gap Activities

Information gap activities encourage learners to share information. In such activities, one pupil can ask questions, the other pupil answers the questions and gives instructions, then they reverse roles. An example of an information gap activity is found in *Hello! Book 1* Unit 25. Here the text contains two different sets of pictures. Picture A set is on the top of the page. Picture B set is upside down on the bottom of the page. The teacher assigns picture A to one child, and picture B to another. Each of them covers the other's picture with a piece of paper, then they start asking questions like, "Is Ali running in your picture?"



A What are they doing?

There are eight differences between pictures A and B.

Is Ali running in your picture?



A

<p>Ali</p> <p>running</p>	<p>Heba</p> <p>brushing her teeth</p>	<p>Nabil</p> <p>kicking a ball</p>	<p>Dina</p> <p>drinking</p>
<p>Magda</p> <p>clapping</p>	<p>The farmer</p> <p>ploughing</p>	<p>Hassan</p> <p>flying a kite</p>	<p>Zeinab</p> <p>sleeping</p>

<p>reading</p> <p>Zeinab</p>	<p>crossing the road</p> <p>Hassan</p>	<p>planting</p> <p>The farmer</p>	<p>watching TV</p> <p>Magda</p>
<p>eating</p> <p>Dina</p>	<p>walking</p> <p>Nabil</p>	<p>brushing her hair</p> <p>Heba</p>	<p>jumping</p> <p>Ali</p>

No, he isn't running. He's jumping.



B

Another example of an information gap activity helps the children to practice *can* and *can't* in questions and answers.

1st child: *Can you fly?*

2nd child: *No, I can't.*

Activity	Can (Name)	Can't (Name)
1. fly?	Ahmed	Ali
2. play the piano?		
3. draw a picture?		
4. write with both hands?		
5. make a pizza?		
6. draw pictures?		
7. play football?		

You can ask your students to walk around the class asking questions and filling in the table above, then they report to the whole class: "*Ahmed can draw a picture, but he can't fly.*" If your class is very large, assign the students to groups of ten and have them ask only the children within the group.

Cueing Activities (Elicitation)

From the very beginning, the teacher can use tables, diagrams, charts, drawings, pictures and real objects to help the students speak naturally. This gives contextual support to the language. There are many examples in *Hello!* For example, in *Hello! I Unit 1* the teacher can help students to speak by saying, "*Tell me about picture one. Is it a cat or a hat?*" The teacher can accept a one word response from the children at the beginning. Follow the elicitation by encouraging students to take the role of the teacher.

Dialogues

Another way of encouraging students to communicate is the use of dialogues. *Hello! Book 1* is full of dialogues which the teacher can make use of for practicing. Dialogues give our students an opportunity to use their imaginations to project themselves into new and novel situations. In *Hello! 1 Unit 2* a child says that her name is "Mimi" and she's ten years old. If we want our students to pretend to be Mimi, they can draw a picture of Mimi or make a mask of Mimi while they use their "Mimi" voices to say the dialogue in English. Ideally, though, we want the children to use these dialogues as models and create authentic dialogues about themselves using their real names and ages. Students can practice these routines in buddy pairs. (See Chapter 7: *Drama and Role Play* for more ideas.)

Role play

Role play moves a step beyond the dialogue and creates a situation in which children use the material they have practiced through dialogues and other classroom activities. (See Chapter 7: TPR, *Drama and Role Play* for more ideas to enliven this activity.)

Songs

Songs incorporate the language of our lessons into appealing melodies and rhythms. As such, they hold strong appeal for children and are often memorized. (See Chapter 4 for the steps in teaching a song and examples of songs to teach.)

Passwords/Language Ladders

The Password approach is one way to teach children essential classroom language (Curtain & Pesola, 1996). Passwords are phrases that students need to negotiate interactions in the classroom. Examples are:

Hello. How are you?

I don't understand.

That's mine.

How do you say(spell) ___ in English?

I need ___.

I'm finished.



The best passwords to choose are the English words for terms that you hear your students use routinely in Arabic. Once this language is identified, it is taught at the rate of one password per day. List the passwords on a chart on the wall where the pupils can refer to them when needed.

Language ladders are similar to passwords in that they are taught one a day. They usually are grouped around a central concept, however (Curtain & Pesola, 1996). For example, you may want to create a language ladder around various ways of saying "Good-bye" in English.

Good-bye.
See you later
Have a good day
So long

Storytelling

Storytelling involves the whole class in speaking activities. This begins with the teacher telling the class that they are going to create a story. The teacher directs the activity by asking questions like, "Where is our story going to take place?" "Who are we going to meet?" and "What will they say to us?" Graphic organizers on the blackboard provide a structure for the story creating activity. (See Chapter 11: *Shared Reading* for more about graphic organizers.)

Where?	Who?	What?
		
 In the desert	the Queen of Egypt	built a large pyramid

The children can practice telling the story in buddy pairs and later write the stories to share with their families.

Teaching Pronunciation

Include pronunciation as an integral part of teaching English from the beginning, just as you teach structures and vocabulary. The first thing the teacher has to keep in mind is to speak clearly, at a normal speed occasionally emphasizing intonation and stress to help the children hear specific words or understand meaning.

There are a number of challenges for Egyptian learners learning to speak English. They are:

- Intonation - rising and falling pitch of the language
- Word and sentence stress - what words and syllables are stressed in the language

Intonation

Intonation is the music of the language. The voice goes up and down as we speak and conveys meaning in English. With children, it is helpful to use a hand/arm motion to indicate intonation that is rising or falling. You can also get children to sit down and stand up according to whether the intonation pattern rises or falls. Children will join in for fun but they will also attend to the message of the gesture.

Word Stress

Word stress in English tends to vary more than in Arabic causing difficulties for our learners. There are a number of things you can do. Use clapping to indicate the strongest stress in a sentence or beat time by tapping out the rhythm on a table. The children will be delighted to imitate you. Jazz Chants are an excellent way of practicing sentence stress. (See Chapter 4: *Songs, Chants and Rhymes for Young Learners* for examples of Jazz Chants.)

An obvious way for students to practice stress and intonation is by repetition. They can listen to the *Hello!* tape and imitate it. If a sentence is long, help them to repeat it from the end. This is called backchaining. The teacher can break the sentence into meaningful units, e.g. if you wanted students to repeat the sentence "*I wasn't able to do my homework yesterday,*" you might proceed as follows:

----- *my homework yesterday.* (students repeat)
----- *able to do my homework yesterday.* (students repeat)
I wasn't able to do my homework yesterday. (students repeat) (Doff, 1988)

Shadow reading is another way of practicing both stress and intonation. Students read under their breath (whisper read) while listening to the tape or the teacher. They can also whisper-read after hearing such models.

Assessing Speaking Skills

The assessment of speaking is a very complex matter. (See Chapter 17: *Classroom Assessment* for more on assessment of oral language.) When you assess your students' speaking skills, keep in mind that with beginners you are after fluency, not accuracy. If students can convey the message or the meaning, don't focus on grammatical mistakes at first.

Perhaps you can model the correct grammar the way caregivers do with young children acquiring their first languages:

1st child: I runned home.

Teacher: You ran home? Good for you!

Take note of student errors and plan lessons to address them later on. A positive, encouraging attitude will encourage children to talk.

Conclusion

Young learners need to speak English with confidence in order to be able to communicate effectively. Since the main purpose of teaching speaking in the primary stage is to enable children to express themselves without hesitation, they should be given frequent opportunities to hear and imitate good models of English language. They should also have many chances to speak the language freely to express their own ideas and to communicate with the teacher and with one another in the classroom. This will be very motivating for young learners of a foreign language. It is your job as the teacher to create many opportunities to help children use the English language for communication and for fun.

Understanding Check

1. What are language functions and why are they important in the primary foreign language classroom?
2. How can the classroom environment help our pupils to feel more at ease about speaking in the language classroom?
3. Should a teacher emphasize correctness or fluency in the primary classroom? Why?
4. What are three activities that promote speaking skills in our primary classrooms?

Key Terminology

Activity

An organized exercise with a task to stimulate language acquisition

Backchaining

A technique for helping children repeat longer utterances by having them repeat from the end of the sentence in phrasal units

Buddy groups

Pairs of students who work together briefly to practice language skills

Communication

The process of producing and communicating a message

Comprehensible Input

Language used by the teacher which the pupils can understand because it is surrounded with context to indicate meaning

Cue

A language signal used to direct communication or to give a clue (idea) or a possible answer (sometimes called an elicitation)

Dialogue

A form of communication between two or more participants

Linguistic function

What we do with language

Holistic approach

Teaching the whole language to children (songs, stories, dialogues) rather than teaching the parts of the language (verbs, nouns, etc.)

Information gap activities

Activities that occur between two children when at least one has information the other wants

Interactions

Activities which occur between language learners involving listening and speaking the foreign language

Minimal pairs

Two words which differ only in one phoneme or speech sound (e.g., thin/fin)

Scaffolds

Contextual clues (pictures, gestures, etc.) to meaning or supports (graphic organizers, language ladders) for speaking or writing the language

Shadow Reading

A technique whereby students read with the teacher in a whisper voice

Vocalization

Speaking to oneself while reading. Vocalization may be out loud or in a barely discernable whisper.

Resources

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Summary Handout for Chapter 9: Teaching Spoken English

Children's Language Functions

- Children use language to assert and maintain social needs:
Teachers promote this function by playing simple games that require the children to interact.
- Children use language to project novel situations
Teachers promote this function by introducing role play, dialogues, puppets and plays.
- Children use language for controlling self and others:
Teachers promote this by teaching language of commands through “direction routines” and Total Physical Response.
- Children use language to inform :
Teachers promote this function when they teach children to label their environment and later to report on their experiences.
- Children use language to forecast and reason:
Teachers promote this function by taking advantage of the children's curiosity and activating their imagination.

Classroom Organization and Speaking Skills

- Language is used meaningfully and purposefully
- Pair work and group work are essential
- Speech is supported by gestures, pictures, body language and situational context
- Errors are tolerated in the initial stages of speech
- Accuracy will develop in time

Activities that Encourage Students to Speak

- Games
- Guessing Activities
- Information Gap Activities
- Cueing Activities
- Dialogues

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- Role Play
 - Songs
 - Passwords/ Language Ladders
 - Storytelling

Teaching Pronunciation

- Intonation: rising and falling pitch of the language
- Word and sentence stress: what words and syllabus are stressed in the language

Assessing Speaking Skills

- It is a complex matter
- We are after fluency for beginners and not accuracy

