

Cat got your tongue in English? Spoken Proficiency

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Auf den ersten Blick scheint der Beitrag von Lesley Lanir wenig mit dem Thema dieses Heftes zu tun zu haben, denn sie nimmt Schüler in den Blick, die im schriftlichen Ausdruck fast «perfekt» sind, jedoch vor mündlichen Aktivitäten quasi allergisch zurückschrecken. Um diese weit verbreitete Scheu begreifbarer zu machen, erinnert die Autorin zunächst an die vielfältigen Prozesse, die beim Sprechen – besonders in einer Fremdsprache – zu beherrschen sind. Darauf baut sie eine Reihe praktischer Vorschläge auf, um Lerner bei mündlichen Produktionen zu unterstützen. Dazu gehören viele Massnahmen, die eigentlich für jeden guten Fremdsprachenunterricht Geltung haben, z.B. das Üben des Wortschatzes in sinnvollen Kontexten, die Verbindung des Lernstoffs mit persönlichen Erfahrungen oder der Rückgriff auf Hilfsmittel, die das Sprechen erleichtern wie cue cards und gedächtnisstützende Bilder. Und so schliesst sich der Bogen, denn wie in vielen vorausgehenden Beiträgen dieses Heftes hervorgehoben wurde, müssen Lernschritte, die für jeden «gewöhnlichen» Unterricht geeignet sind, für inklusive Gruppen besonders sorgfältig geplant werden und deshalb auch für Schüler, die Hilfestellungen bei mündlichen Produktionen benötigen.

One of our aims as teachers is to help our students reach a reasonable level of fluency in conversation. However, some students have difficulties producing spoken language and cannot reach even the basic level of production. It is only natural to call upon our more proficient students to take part in class discussions or to answer simple questions. Yet, once called upon, sometimes our best students suddenly find the need to search in their bags or squirm around looking as if they wished they were wearing Harry Potter's cloak of invisibility. If they do dare utter a sound in English, they mumble, forget words and behave as though they were absent during English grammar lessons.

So, you wonder why, when these students compose beautiful essays, seem to understand every word you say, and achieve high scores in all their tests, do these seemingly high performing class members find it so difficult to chat about every day topics? Why, when giving presentations do they have difficulty with articulation and fluency and need prompt cards? What causes them to have difficulties in spoken language skills that are not necessarily connected to shyness and lack of motivation?

The answer could be that these students may have strong receptive skills but much weaker cognitive systems connected to oral language skills which lead to difficulties communicating their ideas at length in speech. Or maybe they have general phonological problems that are causing overall language weaknesses that can be overcome in other language activities but appear in oral proficiency exercises?

To illustrate the complexity of producing spoken language and the cognitive strain endured, in order to produce a few minutes of coherent speech, the following are some of the basic cognitive functions a student has to perform:

- retrieve vocabulary appropriate to the topic
- compose meaningful sentences
- organise ideas into logical sequences
- articulate English speech sounds and sound patterns
- pay attention to word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and rhythm

The above actions may seem simple, but students with expressive language deficiencies may not be able to orchestrate all the above elements easily in order to produce coherent, fluent speech.

After ruling out any affective causes, a student's difficulties in speaking may arise from:

- weak phonological perception
- semantic, sequential, and long term memory weaknesses
- difficulties holding verbal information temporarily in the working memory system
- inadequate retrieval of language items or chunks

A number or all of the following will be apparent with some students in your classrooms:

- avoidance of oral work
- substituting, omitting, or distorting sounds
- hesitation and long pauses
- repetition of simple phrases or words

- overuse of basic sentence structures
- word retrieval difficulties
- use of circumlocution
- slow response or no response to simple questions

Similar to other language skills, oral proficiency relies upon the interaction of many cognitive and physiological sub-skills working in unison. The amount of mental power needed to operate these cognitive orchestrations can easily overload weak working memory systems. A common result is oral production weaknesses that surface as difficulties in starting, ordering, developing and concluding thoughts since at the same time, the student is trying to produce fluent, coherent strings of language. The bottom line is: their immediate memory systems cannot hold and manipulate that amount of language information. Give the same students pen and paper and time and they'll write everything down in a paragraph because they are downloading what is held in their working memory system onto another medium and freeing up space to retrieve more language information.

As hinted above, a strong marker for teachers will be the differences between the student's performance level in written assignments and oral work. Written work allows students with oral language problems more time to access their internal language system, organise their ideas into words and sentences and once sequenced, reduce the memory load by transferring them onto paper on which the student can review their recorded static chunks of language that cannot fade away from a faulty working memory system. However, for some of our students, language production in general may prove too demanding.

Problems acquiring and retrieving vocabulary

Besides memory weaknesses, when trying to decide the root of a production problem, another area of language weakness that teachers should check is vocabulary.

Two cognitive elements need to be taken into account when considering vocabulary difficulties – storage of lexical items and retrieval. Problems may be found in either or both.

Firstly, the lexical information has to be processed adequately and new vocabulary items need to reach the memory system and stored precisely.

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Practical Help

To aid vocabulary acquisition and overcome inadequate storage, teachers need to ensure that language is being processed properly because of the linguistic phenomenon of minimal pairs. Weak language learners tend to have phonological difficulties – if clear, accurate sounds are not perceived by the students, a different word enters the neurological system other than the target word with a different meaning and even a different function. For example, 'stay' may be the target word but the student with poor phonological perception may perceive 'they' or 'day'.

To counteract this, following the well known information processing theory of Professor of Psychology George Miller, no more than seven new words or chunks should be taught at a time and new pieces of information have to enter the short term memory accurately and be deeply registered in long term memories.

Teachers can do this by modelling new words or phrases clearly using a "listen and repeat" method until the student has mastered the correct articulation. Once a student can repeat a word precisely he or she is more likely to store that word correctly.

Also, if students have poor phonological awareness and language difficulties, avoid teaching similar items with similar phonological properties at the same time. In other words, you may teach word families for instance:

'proper', 'properly', 'improper'

which have the same semantic root

but avoid teaching words that have similar sounds, for example,

'properly', 'probably', 'promptly'

that have no connection semantically.

Besides providing repetitive exposure to accurate new language, to aid word retrieval, it is also important to construct a supportive lexical network by making a broad set of connections and associations available. These may be semantic, phonological, grammatical, or pragmatic. Also to build a strong base:

- teach the most frequently used words and language chunks
- ask students to attach personal experiences to words to create an emotional link
- avoid the use of isolated and meaningless drills and word lists
- present the words in authentic contexts using previously learned vocabulary
- encourage students to produce structures using newly taught vocabulary items

To help with presentations / monologues

- request students to practice repeatedly common phrases / chunks / short replies
- limit the length of talking time
- schedule plenty of preparation time
- allow cue cards and permit the use of 'Power Point' or other assistive technology
- permit the use of images to help students focus and retrieve language

Encourage students to speak even if they only have a basic command and need to interject first language vocabulary when they cannot remember the English word or phrase. Teachers should refrain from interrupting students while they are speaking to correct them. Instead notes of any missing vocabulary or grammar mistakes should be taken and correct versions modeled later using the 'listen and repeat' method mentioned above.

Group activities

For those with oral production difficulties, it is better to consider using group and pair work rather than presentations since most students will be using spoken language for everyday communicative activities and not for presenting material.

Also, group activities will be less stressful and overall result in more natural utterances between the students.

To encourage participation by all members:

- use stimulating activities based on lower level language using task based activities rather than topic based ones. Students prefer to have a goal and tasks give them a reason to work together to achieve an end result.
- ensure a highly proficient student is appointed as the chair person or moderator who ensures everyone participates.
- set a goal of how many utterances each group member has to produce during an allotted time.

Poor oral production by a student may point to a number of language difficulties and affective reasons may not be the primary causes. An



overloaded, weakened language memory system may not allow students the luxury of being able to retrieve streams of organised, coherent language and produce accurate, seamless, spoken strings. In addition, phonological deficits and weak sound memory systems may cause students to have poor vocabulary perception and storage resulting in weak word retrieval. One or both of the aforementioned could be the source of why some of our students have little success in spoken fluency. Retaining, recall and organising language place heavy burdens on working memory systems. If there are any weaknesses in the language system we cannot assume that if students have 'heard it' once or twice, they will remember it and be able to produce it.

Recommended resources reading

Gathercole, S.E. & Baddeley, A.D. (1990). Phonological Memory Deficits in Language Disordered Children: Is there a Causal Connection? *Journal of Memory and Language*, 29, 336 – 360.

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Papagano, C., Valentine, T., & Baddeley, A. (1991). Phonological Short term Memory and Foreign Language Learning. *Journal of Memory and Learning*, 30, 331–347.

Sprenger, M. (1999). *Learning and Memory – The Brain in Action*. Alexandria Virginia: ASCD Publication.

Website

Foreign Language Learning Differences inside-out
<http://www.foreignlanguagelearningdifficulties.com/>

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