A comprehensive approach to developing L2 speaking competence

Robbie Lee Sabnani
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Willy A. Renandya
National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Abstract
Speaking is important to language learners. The ability to structure talk facilitates effective communication with fellow interlocutors. A strong spoken command positions them to participate actively in interactions with their teachers and peers to hone their academic mastery. This article presents a principled approach to improve the accuracy and fluency of learners’ utterances through the teaching speaking cycle (Goh & Burns, 2012). It comprises seven strategically sequenced stages to increase learners’ knowledge of language and discourse, enhance their core skills and heighten their awareness and use of communication strategies. Based on a methodological framework underpinned by cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective domains, the model provides for rehearsal, task repetition and focused teaching to strengthen learners’ oral competence in a holistic manner. Complementing explicit instruction with contextualized practice develops learners’ introspective awareness of the elements and processes in speaking to gain greater autonomy over their progress.

Keywords: L2 speaking skill, L2 speaking competence, metacognitive skills, teaching speaking cycle

Introduction
A learners’ ability to speak well enables him to articulate his thinking about a subject matter and convey meaning to his listeners. This thoughtful engagement, in which he skillfully negotiates exchanges, clarifies his understanding and even co-creates information with his peers hones his academic mastery (Mercer & Littleton, 2007). By asking questions about the curricular content, expressing thoughts clearly and explaining concepts in coherent discourse, he is able to extend his learning. Speaking provides an avenue for him to critically interrogate his grasp of the subject matter. Effective communication enables him to talk to, learn from and in turn impart knowledge to his fellow discussants for knowledge building.

Despite its importance, speaking still poses a challenge for many learners. Its real-time nature requires them to think fast on their feet to structure utterances and respond appropriately. Furthermore, its inherent cognitive demands can be a source of concern and may even discourage them from volunteering their responses or participating actively in interactions. Teachers can guide learners in conceptualizing their utterances by giving them a bank of words,
phrases and widely-used spoken conventions to build their linguistic bases. By expressly providing input on content and language, learners can be helped to focus on the articulation and delivery of their messages to better regulate their performances.

The ephemeral nature of speaking does not easily lend oral texts as a resource for instruction. This is unlike reading or writing, whose permanence allow for close monitoring, error identification and awareness raising. Oftentimes, students do not have a recording of the speaking just transpired and as such, opportunities for revisiting and improving utterances may be somewhat limited. However, technological affordances can be tapped to record speaking for the identification of areas done well as well as those requiring more attention. Actual audio clips of proficient speakers can also be easily disseminated via social media or video sharing platforms to serve as models for learners to emulate. In fact, they can also benefit from peer learning through exposure to good speaking exemplars from their own classmates.

Another issue is teachers’ relatively narrower repertoires that can have an impact on speaking instruction. Teachers cite their inadequate pedagogical knowledge which sees them carrying out incidental, rather than explicit teaching of speaking (Goh et al., 2005). In fact, in many instances, the grammar and discourse structuring of written texts have been used to teach speaking, instead of focusing on the unique features of naturally-occurring interactions (Burns & Joyce, 1997). Moreover, classroom lessons have been observed to take the form of exercises comprising questions from previous oral examinations, preparing learners as test-takers rather than examining how they can work towards improving their verbal proficiency (Baker, 2014).

Communicative competence is an imperative in today’s connected world. With the high value accorded to verbal strengths, it is essential that oral skills be systematically taught in class. This paper introduces a holistic approach which can enrich learners’ cognitive, as well as metacognitive and socio-affective capabilities for speaking. It discusses possible applications of Goh & Burns’ (2012) teaching speaking cycle (discussed in detail in Section 3) to improve the oral commands of language learners in different contexts.

**Speaking competence**

Effective speaking requires a focus on the purpose of the talk, consideration of the cultural and sociolinguistic norms of members participating in the communication and well-thought out messages sent and received by fellow interlocutors. To develop speaking, it is important to first unpack the facets influencing oral competence and how they interact with one another. Teachers’ clear understanding of these aspects can better position them to attend to their learners’ oral quality through the accuracy and fluency of their utterances. A speaker’s fluency is demonstrated as he conveys meaning without too many false starts or hesitations, while his accuracy is depicted through the use of appropriate word forms, vocabulary and sentence structures. A deep appreciation of what oral mastery necessitates allows the planning and sequencing of activities where listeners not only get to practice speaking, but also receive directed instruction to enrich their knowledge and put into action their new understandings. It informs the use of appropriate teaching and learning aids and guides the design of tasks for maximal engagement. The next section describes the elements of speaking competence under the three areas of knowledge of language and discourse, speaking skills and communication strategies.
Knowledge of language and discourse

Knowledge of language and discourse comprises grammatical knowledge, phonological knowledge, lexical knowledge and discourse knowledge. Grammatical knowledge includes knowledge of how words and phrases are strung together, subject-verb agreement and word classes for example. Phonological knowledge includes knowledge of the sounds of words and sentences, with attention to segmental features at the word level as well as supra segmental features beyond the word level such as word stress, intonation and rhythm. It involves chunking words as well as emphasizing relevant syllables in a word, or specific words in a sentence for effect. Lexical knowledge represents the range of words that the speakers have in their schemas. This includes words in their productive vocabulary which they are easily able to access and use during speaking, as well as the larger group of words in their receptive vocabulary that they recognize and can call up onto map against during listening. It also includes knowledge about the literal as well as metaphorical meanings of words, idiomatic expressions and figures of speech. Discourse knowledge includes organization of utterances appropriately and precisely. A nuanced understanding of the structuring of talk enables listeners to predict the impending flow and follow the unfolding of phases in various oral genres (Burns, Joyce & Gollin, 1996). The organization of narratives, recounts, anecdotes according to established patterns allows speakers to continue to remain engaged in exchanges.

Core speaking skills

Core speaking skills reflect the extent to which learners can put into action the knowledge they have assimilated about language and discourse. They comprise pronunciation, speech function, interaction management and discourse organization skills. Outlining each of the skills and what they entail can be helpful for the design and conduct of oral lessons. It provides direction for explicit teaching of specific aspects to hone learners’ strengths in proceduralising their acquisition of language and the appreciation of features of oral texts.

Pronunciation skills refer to how well speakers articulate vowel and consonant sounds and blends, as well as their capacities to use voice qualities appropriately. Speech function skills depict their abilities to perform communicative purposes, for example, making requests, describing events or offering suggestions. Interaction management skills comprise speakers’ actions to initiate, maintain and end conversations as well as their consideration of verbal and nonverbal cues to minimize miscommunication. For example, through accurate interpretation of both the spoken and gestural aspects are depited by fellow listeners. Discourse organization skills ensure coherence in talk through the use of appropriate signposting. This could include the use of appropriate words to signal to listeners how the talk is chronologically organized (e.g., first, next, finally), or changes in topics (e.g., on another note), so that they can better follow and respond to the sharing.

Communication strategies

Communication strategies are particularly helpful to learners. They ease their cognitive loads for speaking to keep interactions going smoothly despite the individuals’ limited speaking skills (Nakatani & Goh, 2007). Communication strategies include cognitive, metacognitive and interactional strategies. Cognitive strategies are those employed by speakers to compensate for their relatively narrower lexical word banks. For example, if he does not know the appropriate word to use, he may replace it with a similar word or describe the characteristics of the word in
question. In this manner, he circumvents his limitation by negotiating the exchange to ensure that meaning is well expressed. Metacognitive strategies are those used to manage thinking and learning, e.g., to plan, regulate and evaluate talk so that speakers can have greater control of their utterances (Bygate, 1998). Interaction strategies are behaviors that speakers enact when faced with problems in the course of communication. These include asking for clarification, checking on comprehension as well as using nonverbal actions to confirm receipt of messages.

**Approaches for developing oral quality**

There exist several approaches in the literature to develop speaking skills, and some of the well cited frameworks include those from Littlewood (1992), Burns, Joyce and Gollin (1996), Thornbury (2005), Becker and Roos (2016) and Goh and Burns (2012). The next section explains the theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings of each.

Littlewood’s (1992) approach situates the understanding of language and skills in practice. It involves focused teaching of language or content which learners then apply in an authentic task. In pre-speaking, teachers provide input on grammar and discourse organization and carry out explicit instruction to raise linguistic knowledge. The engagement of learners in part-skill practice affords avenues for them to enhance their mastery. Its targeted nature allows specific aspects of language, for example, grammar or vocabulary, to be given greater attention. Part-skill practice is then followed by whole-task activities, where learners enact knowledge they have acquired in tasks patterned after actual activities from their daily lives, for example, defending a stand or enlisting a service.

Burns, Joyce and Gollin’s (1996) genre approach involves teaching speaking not at the word or sentence level but rather, at the discourse level. Learners are supported in examining samples of naturally-occurring interactions to identify the features of oral texts. Teachers provide guidance to help them notice the staging and unfolding of talk, for example, through the use of discourse features such as adjacency pairs, turn-taking and topic management. This heightened perspective enables learners to consider how they themselves can apply salient aspects in their own exchanges.

Thornbury’s (2005) framework comprises *awareness raising, appropriation and autonomy*. Teachers direct learners’ attention to accuracy and fluency by listening to the word choices, organization and oratory qualities of eloquent speakers. This enhanced awareness helps them direct their personal factors favorably. In so doing, they are better poised to identify strategies to manage their areas for improvement, for example, handling anxiety. To facilitate appropriation, teachers provide a structure for learners to use the language and skills they have acquired in a controlled setting to attain mastery through sustained practice. As learners become more autonomous and better able to independently engage with fellow participants, support is gradually withdrawn.

Becker and Roos’ (2016) creative speaking model develops learners’ oral capabilities through scaffolded instruction. It comprises three levels: *reproductive language use, creative language use* and *creative and productive language use*. Level 1 involves learners in highly structured activities such as gap-fill tasks. Learners are given pre-determined phrases and formulaic expressions to fill in gaps in information to convey meaning to their listeners. An important aspect of this level involves explicit teaching of speaking for reproductive language use. Level 2 provides variation of the tasks assigned in level 1 and increases their difficulty. The scripted words and phrases are now gradually withdrawn and learners are guided to tap their own experiences and prior knowledge to complete partially-scripted dialogues. Because tasks are
modelled against the earlier practices, learners draw from these lessons on accuracy and fluency to apply in creative language use. Level 3 requires learners to consolidate the explicit instruction and guidance from Level 1 tasks with their assimilated and applied knowledge in Level 2. They now participate independently in non-scripted tasks characteristic of Level 3. Here the tasks more closely model authentic events and happenings that they are likely to encounter in their personal and school lives, like having to express a viewpoint, convince an audience or even retell an experience. Learners tap their understandings to retrieve content and language to engage in creative and productive language use.

Goh and Burns’ (2012) teaching speaking model effectively synthesizes the key facets of effective learning from the above frameworks to offer a holistic approach for the development of speaking. It is based on a methodology anchored on four dimensions: quality of speech, components of speaking competence, the role of metacognition and design of tasks. The desired outcomes of speaking are underpinned by the knowledge, skills and strategies necessary for effective oral communication. The model highlights the importance of metacognition in raising learners’ self-efficacies for maximal engagement, as well as the organization of tasks for effective instruction. It guides planning to enrich learners’ linguistic knowledge. In addition to creating opportunities for practice and skill building, it expressly provides for explicit instruction. Its value is in raising learners’ proficiencies in knowing what and when to speak and just as importantly, contemplating how and why their utterances are formulated as such.

The teaching speaking model gives due attention not only to the product of speaking, but also its processes and is effective for shaping learners’ oral development. It creates opportunities for planning and preparation as well as targeted instruction to hone their strengths in the three aspects of oral competence. Beyond guidance on input and articulation, the model is purposefully designed to heighten learners’ metacognition. Deepening their awareness of the nature and content of their thinking allows them to gain greater control over their learning. The following section describes the different stages in the teaching speaking cycle.

The teaching speaking cycle

![Figure 1. The teaching speaking cycle (adapted from Goh & Burns, 2012 p. 153)](image-url)
**Stage 1: Focus learners’ attention on speaking**

The teacher focuses learners’ attention by raising their person, task and strategic knowledge. This heightened metacognitive awareness positions them to think about how best they can leverage their own understandings to make meaning (person knowledge). It helps them to overcome their limitations to set goals to achieve the demands of their impending tasks (task knowledge). It also informs their choice of suitable strategies to prevent breakdowns in interactions (strategic knowledge).

**Stage 2: Provide input/guide planning**

The teacher provides input on the vocabulary and/or content and guides learners in preparing for speaking. Such explicit support can reduce their processing loads and alleviate the demands of planning and structuring utterances. Having the requisite resources frees up their cognitive capacities for them to participate in talk almost immediately. The teacher activates their prior knowledge to recycle their existing repertoires and facilitates their assimilation of language necessary for the task. She guides brainstorming to enhance the quality of ideas. The directed nature of the instruction reduces the incidence of mistakes and can serve as well to boost confidence. Learners are also taught discourse organization, such as the appropriate use of signposting and linguistic conventions to structure their articulations.

**Stage 3: Conduct speaking tasks**

The purpose of this stage is to allow learners the opportunity to practice speaking with fluency as the main objective. The intent is to create a conducive context for them to express themselves with less emphasis on form by using the resources they already possess, to articulate what they have prepared to say. The relatively less attention to accuracy at this point allows learners to direct their efforts on bringing across their messages appropriately. Learners tap the knowledge imparted by the teacher prior to the task and demonstrate their grasp in small group tasks.

**Stage 4: Focus on language/discourse/skills and strategies**

The teacher then directs learners to specific aspects of the task just completed and identifies areas in need of re-teaching. While the objective of the previous stage was on conveying meaning, here the teacher provides guidance to increase accuracy. She also explicitly teaches core skills, for example, on pronunciation or interaction management. She brings to the fore their awareness how they can contend with difficulties in speaking.

**Stage 5: Repeat speaking tasks**

Learners now re-attempt their speaking tasks, having received instruction on oral knowledge, skills and strategies. The tasks can be redone with modification to provide some variation or teachers may request that only certain parts be revisited. Repetition allows learners to benefit from cycles of improvement. The element of rehearsal allows learners to attend to areas they are less skillful at and improve their performance through deliberate practice. It can facilitate the enrichment of their prior knowledge and lead to greater oral accuracy and fluency. The opportunity to reattempt aspects of their tasks with greater proficiency also develops their confidence.
Stage 6: Direct learners’ reflection on speaking

This penultimate stage sees the teacher facilitating learners’ reflections on their completed tasks and eliciting thoughts on their experiences. She scaffolds them in consolidating their existing and acquired knowledge and evaluating their progress though the cycle. Learners can be guided to identify their successes as well as work on their problem areas.

Stage 7: Facilitate feedback on learning

In this final stage, the teacher gives learners feedback on the preceding six stages. She also responds to their reflections by providing information, clarification and suggestions. Feedback is also elicited from other listeners through the use of open-ended prompts to invite them to share observations of their peers’ performances.

Applications for teaching speaking in various language learning contexts

Speaking tasks

The teaching speaking cycle offers a principled approach to planning, structuring and evaluating tasks to develop speaking in a holistic manner. For its successful implementation, it is important to design activities which provide suitable contexts for learners to manage their emotions, practice speaking and hone their oral strengths. In this section we elaborate on three task types (communication-gap, discussion and monologic tasks) that can be used in the speaking cycle.

Communication gap tasks involve learners having different segments of information which they must collaboratively share. Their task is to interact within their pairs or small groups for the complete message to be well received by all members participating. To achieve their intended outcomes, they tap on their linguistic knowledge, skill proficiencies and understanding of strategies to close the gaps in information between fellow conversationalists. The information materials can be presented to learners by way of printed segments of texts, short audio clips or even pictures and illustrations which they have to relate, describe or explain.

Discussion tasks require learners to tap their prior knowledge from their own schemas, as well as rich background and personal experiences to argue a case or even present a solution to a problem. Teachers can consider using authentic materials such as print and social media to provide practice closely depicting the demands of speaking in learners’ lives. Where more scaffolding is needed, it can be provided as discussion pointers on cue cards for use as guides. Another form discussion tasks can take is role plays, where learners may be told what to say or how to behave in enacting their respective roles.

Monologic tasks, on the other hand, require individuals to produce extended pieces of discourse to their listeners. Learners choose or are given a topic to speak on for a sustained period without any expected responses or turn-taking by listeners. The communicative outcomes can include narratives, personal reflections, recounts or persuasive texts. They have to manage their speaking before, during and after their presentations to ensure the effective delivery of their messages. The speeches can be planned, rehearsed or spontaneous. The prospect of having to face an audience may be potentially overwhelming for a speaker, so teachers could consider organizing tasks in small groups to contend with any fears. As learners become more confident, they can be supported to speak in larger groups.
Using the teaching speaking model

The teaching speaking cycle presents myriad opportunities for use in various language learning contexts. While the seven stages are presented in a cyclical manner, they do not all have to be carried out in one lesson. Rather, they can be taught over a series of lessons, such that more time can be spent on areas requiring more practice and tailored to learners’ specific needs.

Speaking may be a course for anxiety for some learners and this apprehension may make them less keen to engage in talk or deliver presentations to an audience. Teachers can boost their confidence in Stage 1 by managing their stress. In this manner, learners can work on channeling their capacities productively as they interact with fellow interlocutors. Guiding learners’ introspective examination of their own strengths enables them to enlist suitable strategies to prevent breakdowns in communication.

To ease processing demands, especially in the case of young or beginning learners, Stage 2 allows teachers to provide input for the structuring of utterances. This could include words and phrases commonly used in verbal exchanges, as well as widely understood prefabricated chunks which they could apply quickly and effectively to deliver their messages.

Stage 3 affords opportunities for learners to put into action their knowledge in a controlled environment. With the primary emphasis of this stage on fluency, learners may be more willing to engage in conversations. They tap their understandings to keep their interactions going smoothly.

Stage 4 presents avenues for differentiated instruction, and will be especially relevant in classes with students of varying abilities. Directed teaching is carried out to address learners’ specific gaps, for example, through lessons focused on grammatical accuracy or sentence structuring.

Now that learners have practiced speaking and received guidance to manage their limitations, they could be encouraged in Stage 5 to engage in a series of tasks similar to their original assignments. For example, to achieve a different outcome, with a change in the purpose or audience. They use their widened repertoires to attain the objectives of the adapted tasks. Furthermore, familiarity with task demands facilitates their use of effective strategies for communication.

Having provided input, practice and correction, teachers can use Stage 6 to actively guide learners in thinking about their progress in a systematic manner. For example, by highlighting the key aspects of language they found useful in putting together their utterances, as well as any additional resources needed. In critically inspecting their real-time interactions, learners become more aware of the intent and actions of speaking instead of just concentrating on its final deliverable. This deepened cognizance raises their self-efficacies for independent learning.

The feedback process in Stage 7 affords the learner an evaluation of his performance at multiple levels. Beyond the traditional teacher-student feedback mode, it can be used to elicit peer comments by way of students exchanging penned reflections of their own and their classmates’ speaking. Online blogs and social media can be leveraged as platforms for exchange. Students’ comfort and ease with mobile applications may possibly make them more amenable to giving and receiving feedback. To this end, technology-enabled sharing can serve as a rich resource to improve the overall oral competence of the class.
Conclusion

In order for learners to develop their speaking skills, they need not only acquire the knowledge for oral communication, but also be presented with suitable settings in which they can practice their use of skills and enactment of strategies. Providing scaffolding on ideas and formulation of utterances helps learners negotiate their real-time interactions by allowing them to free up resources to attend to the smooth and accurate delivery of their messages. Creating a warm environment for speaking encourages participation and builds their self-esteem. This positive climate, coupled with teachers’ gentle constructive comments and useful peer feedback can serve to further encourage learners and inform their learning.

The teaching speaking model offers a structured and systematic approach which can be applied in various language learning contexts. The cycle throws light on the critical role of the teacher in shaping learners’ cognitions and affect for speaking. Its stages are well sequenced to strengthen oral quality with a balance on communicative competence and linguistic accuracy. It provides for focused lessons as well as the carrying out of activities to raise learners’ understanding and capabilities to use language and discourse, core skills and communication strategies. Beyond explicit instruction, it foregrounds the importance of deepening learners’ metacognitive awareness by enhancing their capacities to plan, monitor and evaluate their progress.

The authors

Robbie Lee Sabnani is a language teacher educator. Her instructional and academic interests include speaking and listening, metacognition in learning and teachers’ knowledge and beliefs. She has presented her research on teacher expertise and the development of oral English competence at several local and international conferences. She teaches a range of higher degree, pre-service and undergraduate courses in the areas of Professional English, Practical Pronunciation, Communication Skills and Multicultural Studies at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Willy A. Renandya is a language teacher educator with extensive teaching experience in Asia. He currently teaches applied linguistics courses at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He has given numerous plenary presentations at regional and international conferences, and published extensively in the area of second language education. His latest publications include Motivation in the language classroom (2014, TESOL International), Simple, powerful strategies for Student Centered Learning with George Jacobs and Michael Power (2016, Springer International), and Cooperative Learning in Language Education (2019) with George Jacobs. He maintains an active language teacher professional development forum called Teacher Voices: https://www.facebook.com/groups/teachervoices/.

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