



## TODAY'S THEME: THE CREATION OF AN ACTIVITY TO ENHANCE SPEAKING IN THE CLASSROOM

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### Abstract

*The paper deals with one of the many challenges teachers face in the EFL/ESL classroom. The study emphasizes on the idea that students must not only to speak but to make progress in their speaking skill in a credible way. The suggestions provided in student books or other resource materials may not always fit the needs of the teachers in their quest of finding activities better suited to meet their objectives. If teachers cannot find suitable activities they must adapt existing ones or create new activities. This paper looks at how a set of topic cards for speaking was created to help the students meet certain objectives. The design of these cards developed through such considerations as incorporation of new vocabulary, exchange of ideas, individual pacing and provision of a variety of topics. How the activity addresses the growth of student's confidence is also discussed in the present short communication.*

**Keywords:** *Enhancing speaking in class, EFL/ESL, material development, student confidence*

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### 1. Introduction

It is not uncommon for students to know their vocabulary and grammar reasonably well for their level yet are waiting for some magical point or level in the future where they would be able to use it fluently in their speaking. The art of speaking is a daunting challenge for many students and successful completion of exams and exercises of grammar and vocabulary does not necessarily aid the student in developing his/her speaking skills. It is imperative that students engage in the activity of speaking several times a class with the purpose of becoming familiar with it. They have to experience the dynamics of engaged speaking, that it is possible to communicate using the language in different situations. And they have to accept that while everything may not be perfect, they are able to accomplish many tasks with the skills they have. The teacher's goal is to increase their awareness that this is possible and the shared goal with the students is to make their skills stronger. As the teacher and students progress through these two goals, the students' confidence as an English language user can also be strengthened. Confidence can be a key factor in strengthening the learner's speaking performance (Boonkit, 2009).

When looking at a speaking activity, or any activity for that matter, it is highly advisable to have clear objectives in mind. They are not simply "students do a speaking activity" because any form of speaking will accomplish that. It doesn't help the teacher look at what, if any, progress the students are making nor inform him/her of how well they do. Furthermore, having clear objectives in a task enhances the commitment of the participants as loosely defined goals may lead to lower dedication and performance (Locke, 1996; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2013).

Each student's needs, their ways of approaching language learning, even their personality are valuable factors to consider. The collective needs, both the character of that particular class, and also the imposed syllabus of what succeeding in that level consists of are elements of no less importance. Integrating all these perspectives leads one to more directly relevant directions to take, what to focus on while carrying out a speaking task. There are many interpretations of what constitutes speaking performance and how it can be measured (Koizumi, 2005) but one or a few should be decided upon. When those become clearer, the teacher can then better choose which activity to do, or if there isn't one readily available, then either adapt some existing exercise or create a new one entirely which is better suited to furthering those objectives.

One of the areas that typically surfaces in these reflections is how to make their speaking (and writing) richer. Students have a tendency to depend on one or two structures for communicating one idea where more would allow them a greater range of expression. One example is using *will* almost exclusively for the future or *A is taller than B* rather than *A is a bit / much taller than B*. Of course not knowing how to use these structures very well would hold them back but if they have already spent some time in class on them, then the students should be encouraged to apply them in their speaking. If it is the first time that the structures are being introduced, speaking activities could be provided at several steps during the presentation rather than delayed until after everything has been covered. Those activities might limit their focus only on one or two aspects such as a question and answer format in pairs, but these interim steps both provide extra practice and the opportunity to familiarize the students with the greater task of freer speaking coming up soon.

The basic structures and pronunciation can be provided, and after some initial practice, the activity could progress to exploring a slightly greater range of options. Even with an introductory class of some structure to a low level group, some freer speaking activity is often warranted. The 'asker' may not be able to predict what the 'responder' will say and this may alter the contents if not the direction of their limited exchange. They should be given the opportunity and the exposure to a situation where they can try out using that target language at one or more points during a dynamic and moving conversation. Let them take the decision when to make their move and how to approach it. And let this become a familiar scene, where several times in a class they are in speaking situations faced with not just 'speaking about last weekend', but actually having the extra task to use unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar. (Unfamiliar in this context does not necessarily refer to new concepts, structures or vocabulary to the student, just that it is not typically employed in their productive skills.)

'Recycling' or re-introducing elements covered in previous classes can help the students remember those elements and strengthen their usage. Recycling can even take on the form of using the elements introduced earlier in the class such as when students engage in a full class discussion after exploring the theme in pair-work, or to give feedback about the experience in a reflective type of activity, which also can help the students assimilate the new items better (SOLANO, 2014). This is an approach very familiar to most teachers, but applied to elements anticipated in future units of their student book or syllabus is less common. The teacher (and student) needn't wait for a particular item or area to appear three units down the road. If the teacher is considering a speaking activity that might involve using structures the students aren't very strong in, a quick intro/reminder/presentation could be made followed by the students engaging in freer applied speaking. That item can still be covered in more detail in a future class when it is more formally presented in the student book or syllabus, but in the current class the teacher can get some idea of where the strengths and difficulties are found.

This preliminary exploration can be greatly beneficial in providing information and some ideas on how to approach that distant unit. It also can be very effective in preparing the students for that complicated future unit by introducing some concepts and brief activities in various classes before it comes up in the calendar and they are better prepared to take on that formidable challenge when the time comes.

## 2. An account of how the activity evolved

Keeping in mind the factors mentioned in the previous section, the researcher began the journey of creating a speaking activity. The intention was to come up with an activity that was easy to use, that engaged the students and to encouraging them to not only use a richer repertoire of language, but also to become accustomed to setting goals and tasks to achieve while speaking. The study came up with several formats and the one presented in this paper is one of the more successful projects. This project is entitled TODAY'S THEME and one of the thrusts is what the title implies, that there will be a number of themes covered in a number of classes, and that each theme is not dependent on any of the others.

In the initial explorations, the researcher wanted a variety of themes, any of which could be used either to support something that is being currently covered in class, or that could be used independently so it doesn't have to tie into anything. There have been many occasions that the students have been observed to get enthusiastic about a theme and wanted to continue speaking about it in the following class. This was something that the researcher wanted to capitalize on.

They wouldn't want to speak about exactly the same thing, but something related, perhaps a different angle on the subject. From this evolved the general theme such as speaking about CULTURE, and three topics which more clearly define a particular direction to explore.

In this case we have three major points:

- a. Origin and meaning of our holidays
- b. Why is culture important?
- c. Are subcultures important?

If it is an active class full of students who need very little prompting, the researcher could, if he had to because of time constraints for example, just give them the theme and they would go at it. But the top priority in this project was to introduce more vocabulary and have the students incorporate it in their speaking. The researcher also wanted them to become familiar with actively influencing their own efforts and the conversation by making the opportunities to insert those expressions. If an activity structured in this way was carried out on several occasions, it would become easier over time.

The researcher kept the vocabulary to a standard six items. It wasn't too much to be overwhelming nor distracting by creating the need of much time to go over the meanings. Yet there were enough items for the students to have something of a selection. While speaking they didn't have to each use all six but they could each try to get more than one into the discussion.

Furthermore, as one would expect, the students get more out of the speaking with some build-up, which in this case means both warming the students into the topic and preparing them with that extra vocabulary to incorporate into their coming discussion. The lead-in questions, the eliciting and introducing the vocabulary beforehand, looking at the text all was worth the investment and resulted in more successful and exciting conversations. When they were encouraged to use some of the vocabulary again in the closing class discussion, the vocabulary was further reinforced.

A grammar option was added, but downplayed. The idea was that a wide variety of teachers and a greater variety of students would be using the cards and there would be occasions (time constraints, first getting accustomed to using the cards, desire for a simpler focus) that it would not be appropriate.

However, for more advanced classes or with students who are keen to take on added challenges, it helps to provide that extra option as added direction in how to enrich the speaking further.

After playing with various designs, the following is the one the author finally designed:

TT 2-3	Today's theme:	Words for today:
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Are subcultures important?</i></p> <p>Hippies, rappers, squatters and communes are references to some known subcultures and alternative lifestyles. What are your thoughts on them? Independent of how different they are to your lifestyle, do you think they play an important part in the bigger picture of things?</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to swap places (with <u>sb</u>)</li> <li>● to be not cut out for <u>st</u></li> <li>● to look down on <u>sb/st</u></li> <li>● to bring about <u>st</u> (change)</li> </ul>
<p>Structures to use:</p> <p>1) comparatives with adverbs <i>ex: not nearly/quite as far/a bit better than</i></p> <p>2) Optional: you choose another structure</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to endorse <u>st</u></li> <li>● to catch on</li> </ul>

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Figure-1: A 'Today's Theme' topic card used in small group speaking ('sb'= somebody/ 'st'= something)

The author decided against worksheets and homework. The researcher did not want the activity to get too cumbersome. Better to keep it light and moving. The students will forget some of the vocabulary anyway but there might be a few items they particularly took a liking to and try to use them in the future. More important was to get the students involved and deliberately making decisions on taking some control in their speaking in conversations.

### 3. Enhancing students' confidence

Enhancing the student's confidence has been mentioned earlier in this paper. The following can help elucidate how this intention is attempted to be realized in the activity.

- a. *Preparation:* The lead-in questions and preliminary class speaking are helpful in orientating the students and this increases the likelihood of their participation in the coming task, even if they don't participate much or at all in this first phase.
- b. *Individual pacing:* Attempting to do what others want in the way they want adds extra doubts for many people. Providing some flexibility gives the students more breathing room. They can decide which vocabulary item(s) to use in the conversation and when. Depending on their personality and mood at the time, they can take risks with less familiar items or play it safe with something more known, whichever is more appropriate to how they feel in the current class with the current group members.
- c. *Active participation:* By giving them the repeated responsibility (over the course of a number of classes and different topic cards) of choosing which items and when to incorporate them into the conversation, the students, over time, become a little more accustomed to being and seeing themselves as responsible active users of English.
- d. *Familiarity:* There are many speaking cards which can be used in several classes. Once the students are familiar with the situation and the expectations, they feel more comfortable and can focus their attention on doing the task better.

- e. *Feedback*: As with any task where constructive feedback is given, the students can ask the teacher if their usage of the target language is appropriately used when it occurs. It is one thing to do a few exercises and another to know if the situation permits it in a dynamic ongoing conversation. Moreover, there is feedback from the other students as they respond to the contributions made by the current speaker as well as from the teacher monitoring the conversations and giving some guidance during or after the discussion.

#### 4. Conclusion

The intention of this article was to show an example of how some ideas can evolve into an activity that can help the students and the teacher meet their objectives and in this case incorporating new vocabulary into their speaking and to feel more confident while engaging in the task. To access the full listing of topic cards and their accompanying lesson plans and teaching suggestions, the readers and academicians may visit [maxenglishcorner.com](http://maxenglishcorner.com).

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