NET IDEAS. SPEAKING.

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Speaking is possibly the most difficult communicative skill to implement in EFL classes. This article is an attempt to provide some help by means of different types of resources available on the net, from the most paper-like ones to those which make use of all the web's technological possibilities.

One of the most difficult issues when teaching English as a Foreign Language is making our students actually speak the language. There are a number of reasons why most students find speaking English so difficult, among which we can point out the following:

- Language education in Spain has traditionally focused on grammar and correct written output, sometimes because of time pressure to complete official programmes.
- Speaking is an interactive communicative skill, possibly the only one which cannot be done by oneself in independent study, which implies that:
  a) An audience is needed (you are not supposed to talk by yourself!). This is a problem with shy students.
  b) A motivating topic (one that makes students *want* to speak about) is required.
  c) There must be a reason to speak (information gap).
- Unlike the majority of our European neighbours, except for some tourist locations, the English class is the only time when students listen to English, i.e., they lack oral input.
- Speaking is a stressful process since, due to its spontaneous nature, it is not always possible to plan our speech beforehand, and as a consequence, more mistakes are likely to appear than when using the written register.
- Students see themselves as worse speakers than they really are.

However, it is a widely accepted fact that speaking is a fundamental part of language learning, up to the point that some people do not consider that they have mastered a foreign language if they cannot actually speak it fluently.

Nowadays, we can find some help on the net to overcome some of the problems mentioned above. Let us suggest some websites that can be helpful to carry out speaking activities in our daily practice, together with some suggestions about how to implement them with our students.

Although there is a great variety of sites devoted to speaking, most of them simply offer traditional layouts and plans for the lesson, just like the ones that can be found in traditional books. Nevertheless, some of these web pages seem to be one step ahead because of the ease in locating the topic in which we may be interested (by means of hyperlinks), and because of the amount of (in some cases, regularly updated) lessons. Some examples are the following:

- **http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/speak/shtml.** This webpage is included within a site sponsored by the British Council and the BBC. It includes a collection of articles about speaking written by teachers and teacher trainers (most of them working at the British Council) with down-to-earth tips, ideas, lesson plans, etc. It has a related page with speaking activities, games, etc; although they are not designed to be carried out online (http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/try/speaktry/speaking-activities.shtml). It can be useful as a theory and exercises database, although most of all for intermediate or higher-level students.
- **http://esl.about.com/od/conversationlessonplans** has approximately the same structure as the previous page, although there are lesson plans for students with a wider range of ability.
- **http://iteslj.org/questions** This *Internet TESL Journal* section offers a wide range of

questions (over 500) that can be used to facilitate conversation in class. The good thing about this page is that they are organised in topics of interest (112 topics), such as sports, meeting people, jobs, personality, literature, etc. It can be useful for higher-intermediate levels and for preparing our lessons beforehand, rather than for direct use in class.

- **http://proteacher.com/070001.shtml** Although it has fewer activities than the previous ones, this page offers some good ideas to carry out with lower-level students.
- **http://www.ourchatterbox.co.uk/chatterbox.php** This webpage helps generate questions to facilitate conversations. You just have to tick the topic(s) of interest and the audience you want to address (family, couples, etc.) and the programme automatically creates ten questions. It also offers the possibility of suggesting our own questions. Unlike the previous pages which also offered questions, this one can be used in class; it is quite amusing, especially when students select the wrong audience box.

One of the problems with some of the so-called "speaking webpages" is that, apparently, they haven't moved forward from the structural approaches to the teaching-learning process (the same happened with the first grammar or vocabulary exercises at the beginning of CALL, which looked very much like computerised drills). As far as speaking is concerned, they do not go beyond some vocabulary or (useful?) sentences that you can listen to (normally using the American English variety), so that the (supposedly independent) student can repeat them and adjust to the correct pronunciation (quite like Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*). For example, we can point out the following two (**http://speaking-english.com/html/RunAOFree.htm** or **http://speaking-english.com/html/RunBOFree.htm**), which offer not too realistic dialogues about greetings and tourism.

We can make a much better use of the web if we use it as source of information to provide input about a speaking topic. For instance, we can organise a group work activity about superstitions and urban legends so that students have to discuss which ones they know (and they think are real), what they think about them, etc. Before the debate takes place, the group can be divided in three, having each part take a look at different web pages dealing with the issue (**www.corsinet.com/trivia/scary.html**, **www.oldsuperstitions.com**, or **www.urbanlegendsonline.com**) so that, during the debate, they can tell their partners those that they have found more interesting or weird.

Let us finish with the most interesting tool that online technologies offer: the possibility of having real-time conversations with other people. One of the best options (although quite difficult to put into practice for 'Guadalinex' users) is to download free software such as 'paltalk' (www.paltalk.com) or 'skype' (www.skype.com), which allow for real-time voice and video conversations (obviously a webcam and a microphone are needed). The advantage of these programmes is that we can very easily create our own chat room (in this case, not restricted to writing) and organise small group exchanges with other students, either native speakers of English or EFL students. It is possible to find partners in many different ways, although we can always make use of the well-known **http://www.mylanguageexchange.com/Search.asp** or the **www.eslcafe.com** forums. In case we decide to organise this type of class-to-class speaking partnerships, it is very important to bear in mind both the level and age of our students and those participating in the exchange, and to establish with the other teacher(s) very clear protocols as far as how to plan the lessons, how to cope with disruptive behaviour, the language(s) employed during the exchange, the frequency of online meetings, etc.

As a conclusion, it can be said that by means of the net we have a lot of options to improve our focus on speaking and to organise different types of interesting activities with our students, lowering the strain that this productive skill produces on some of them. Although those utilities that seem to be more useful, such as voice chats, are the most difficult to be carried out due to technological (downloading software with 'Guadalinex' is quite difficult) and methodological issues, the results obtained deserve the necessary effort. Have a go!