



# Speed Speaking: A New Activity to Engage More Learners to Talk

Feng Teng<sup>i</sup> & James Wong, Nanning University, Nanning City, China

## Abstract

*Teaching English in Asian contexts uses classroom talk as a primary source of language learning. Research efforts have been devoted to ways of engaging more learners to talk in English. However, many activities fail to meet this goal. This article reports on a new concept responding to this problem and introduces “Speed Speaking”, a new activity for teaching spoken English. Provided that this activity is thoroughly developed and properly placed in the lesson plan, it contributes to the degree of student ownership of English as a personal tool. It also provides a platform from which teachers can maximize the possible outcome in their own classrooms, as well as giving a relaxed setting for students to build new language bridges, and to interact more with new voices, and grasp some linguistic features.*

**Keywords:** *teaching speaking, speed speaking, oral production, oral activities*

## Apstrakt

*Nastava engleskog jezika na prostoru Azije koristi razgovor na času kao primaran izvor učenja jezika. Mnoga istraživanja su posvećena uključivanju što većeg broja učenika u razgovor na engleskom, ali mnogobrojne aktivnosti nisu uspele da postignu taj cilj. U ovom radu govori se o novom konceptu kao odgovoru na pomenuti problem i predstavlja se tzv 'Brzi razgovor' (Speed Speaking) kao nova aktivnost za predavanje govornog jezika. Ukoliko se ova aktivnost razvije na pravi način i ukoliko joj se nađe odgovarajuće mesto u okviru časa, ona doprinosi tome da se učenici služe engleskim kao ličnim alatom u komunikaciji. Ona takođe obezbeđuje osnovu iz koje nastavnici mogu da izvuku maksimum na svojim časovima. Pored toga, ova metoda omogućava stvaranje opuštene atmosfere uz pomoć koje učenici stvaraju nove jezičke mostove, komuniciraju uz pomoć novostečenih znanja i usvajaju određene lingvističke forme.*

**Ključne reči:** *nastava govora, brz razgovor, oralna produkcija, oralne aktivnosti*

## 1. Introduction

Realizing that he could not express what he was thinking, Shu<sup>1</sup> stood up and said to his teacher, in halting English, “Sorry, I don’t know.” The teacher signaled him to sit down, which he did reluctantly.

Shu is probably not alone. Many students who learn English as a foreign language (EFL) may encounter the same problem.

They often repeat the same phrases, use the same words, and ask the same questions in class. Although they acknowledge that the mastery of spoken English is a priority, it is still the most difficult task for them, especially those with limited English proficiency levels (Goh & Burns, 2012; Richards, 2008).

This is not really surprising, because when EFL learners are required to talk, the fear

of talking in public is enhanced and they are often paralyzed by this fear. In addition, they are passive speakers because from the beginning of their learning process, they put the most emphasis on explicit rote memorization (Lee, 2013). Therefore, their sense of language proficiency ranges from not being able to understand what the speaker is saying, to not being able to talk proficiently in the new language.

This article proposes that instead of relying on students to eventually develop their speaking skills on their own, teachers should actively design some oral activities to increase their proficiency. For this reason we would like to introduce “Speed Speaking,” an activity that was found to be effective in allowing every student to talk a great deal in the classroom, and increase their quality of communicative competence in English. We will begin with a reflection on what makes speaking English difficult for EFL learners, and why we need this activity.

## 2. Background

Talking in English in a classroom is predominant in an institutional setting, and is the main means for EFL learners to communicate. Distinct from natural conversation, the kind of communication to be conducted has already been determined in classroom talk, and it is

restricted by the goals of the teachers and students (Heritage, 2005). Clearly, classroom talk has its own characteristic difficulties, and is not in line with the criteria for natural conversation among native speakers. Hence, it is not surprising that learning how to speak English in an EFL context will present obstacles. What follows is a summary of what the experts say, as well as what the opinions of the teachers are. Last but not least, we analyze the opinions of the students themselves.

### 2.1 What do experts say?

First, speaking English as a foreign language presents considerable challenges. Luoma (2004, cited in Richards, 2008:19) summarizes the following features of spoken discourse that makes speaking difficult:

- Composed of idea units (conjoined short phrases and clauses)
- May be planned (e.g. a lecture) or unplanned (e.g. a conversation)
- Employs more vague or generic words than written language
- Employs fixed phrases, fillers, and hesitation markers
- Contains slips and errors reflecting online processing
- Involves reciprocity (i.e. interactions are jointly constructed)
- Shows variation (e.g. between formal and casual speech)

For example, the use of fixed phrases, one of the difficulties mentioned above, gives conversational discourse the quality of naturalness. EFL learners need to learn, memorize, and accumulate thousands of fixed phrases, which is an incremental and complex process (Teng, 2014). However, native speakers have a repertoire of thousands of fixed expressions, and their use in appropriate situations creates natural spoken discourse (O’Keeffe et al., 2007).

Second, EFL learners often have some entrenched language errors, and this phenomenon is referred to as “fossilization.” This refers to the persistent language errors in the speech of the learners, despite the fact that they might have made progress in overall language development (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). These kinds of errors, despite persistent correction, are still difficult to eradicate. Although not all the fossilized errors trigger misunderstanding, some errors may cause serious problems in communication, and thus influences the learners’ willingness to communicate.

The third problem in speaking is aggravated by the learners’ tendency to formulate utterances in their native language (Thornbury, 2007). In other words, students’ native language has a

transferred influence on their spoken English.

Fourth, the deficiency of cultural knowledge often leads to the learners’ confusion and misunderstanding even if they have a rather advanced proficiency level (Beamer & Varner, 2001).

Armed with the above knowledge, we easily understand what might be beneficial or detrimental for teaching English. Although it is necessary and valuable, it is also not a bad idea to seek pedagogical input from experienced teachers and collect students’ thoughts on how they regard spoken English.

## 2.2 What do teachers say?

In the case of EFL speaking, what do experienced teachers say about problems that their learners encounter? We invited ten English teachers for an interview and here are three summarized excerpts:

### Excerpt 1

*It is normal to find students not comfortable in class. The main reason is their issue of saving face, or shyness. One obvious reason is their inhibition; they would not like to end up as the laughing stock or get mocked or ridiculed by their peers. - Ms. Qin*

### Excerpt 2

*One of the reasons that the learners do not want to speak English is the lexical barriers. They do not have sufficient words to express their ideas correctly, for which they can express a lot in their native language. It takes a long time for learners to move from pronouncing a new word, then recalling it, to appropriately introducing this word in a conversation. - Ms. Zhang*

Excerpt 3

*The reason that the students are not willing to speak English is related to the whole environment. A lack of creativity which is a consequence of the entire upbringing in an EFL context connected to the culture. The culture makes them predictable social automatons and destroys anyone who dares to be different. The culture just kills creativity. - Mr. Li*

Table 1 Students' main difficulties in speaking English explained by English teachers

	Main problems	%
1	Students' lack of confidence	100
2	Class size	70
3	Lack of effective teaching method	60
4	Limited vocabulary level	50

**2.3 What do students say?**

The learner plays an active role in developing automaticity and fluency in speaking English, and it should be of the utmost importance to understand how they think. We interviewed 40 students majoring in business to understand how students regard their unwillingness to speak in English. Here are three excerpts translated from Mandarin into English that contain the students' interview responses:

Excerpt 1

*The main reason I barely speak English is that I do not have the confidence. Although I really want to take part in some English activities, I am just too scared to speak English because when I speak, I will make mistakes. - Jack*

Excerpt 2

*When I want to speak English, I just find out that I don't have enough words to express my feeling. Although I spent a lot of time memorizing some words, I still find that I have no English words to speak. - Elaine*

Excerpt 3

*If I try to speak English outside my class, other people will definitely laugh at me. They will regard me as crazy, because no one speak English in my real life. I can never find a person who is willing to speak English with me. - Lily*

Table 2. Main difficulties in speaking English collected from students

	Main problems	%
1	Lack of confidence	100
2	Lack of words to express	90
3	Cultural problems	90
4	Ineffective teaching method	60

Bearing in mind the above mentioned difficulties proposed by experts, teachers, and students, an effective activity should address at least the following problems:

- Provide the students with more fixed phrases
- Help them notice their entrenched errors
- Encourage more students to speak in English
- Provide the opportunity for learning cultural knowledge
- Help students have more confidence in speaking English
- Help students accumulate words

There are many existing activities that focus on specific features of oral interaction (topic description, question-answer strategies, etc.), and other activities that create conditions for oral interaction (negotiation, role-play, task implementation, group work, etc.). We believe that these activities are not

sufficient to address the difficulties mentioned above. That is why we would like to introduce “Speed Speaking,” a new, effective oral activity.

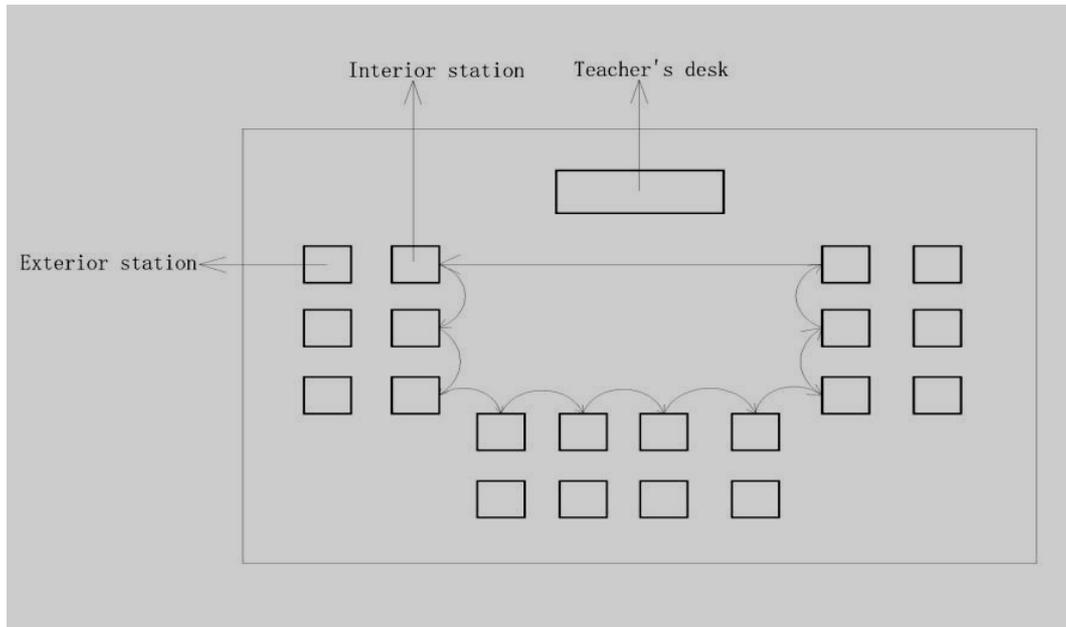
### 3. Practice of Speed Speaking

Speed Speaking (SS) is an oral activity especially suited for use in Chinese classrooms or a similar EFL context. SS is based on a social interview technique in which one learner speaks with a partner for a limited amount of time and then rotates to a new partner. For use in the classroom, SS is a valuable tool for drawing out discussion, especially from students who are reticent to speak in class. This technique is particularly valuable for students who are much more willing to speak in a controlled and private setting than in a public forum.

SS requires a relatively large classroom with movable chairs (stations). Two stations (called a “couplet”) are positioned facing one another at intervals around the periphery of the room. There is one station for each student in class. Thus, a typical class of twenty students will have twenty stations arranged as ten couplets. In each couplet one station is positioned with its back to the wall (the exterior station) and the other station with its back to the center of the room (the interior station). Those students in the exterior stations remain seated in the same station for the duration

of the exercise. Those students in the interior stations move to the next interior

station at the teacher's command (See Figure1. Configuration for SS).



It is best for the teacher to assign a specific student for each exterior station as this creates a sense of a fixed group. The teacher then tells the remaining half of the class to find an open interior station. In assigning exterior stations it is best to alternate more proficient and less proficient students. If all the students in the exterior stations are proficient then it is likely they will always be speaking with less proficient students in the interior stations (and vice versa). Randomizing the placement of students according to their ability ensures that at some point more proficient students will enjoy a deeper conversation. In the event of an odd number of students in class there are two

options. An extra interior station could be added to one of the couplets so that three students speak together, and when the rotation occurs, the students simply remain in that particular couplet for two rounds. The other option is for the teacher to establish himself as an exterior station. This invariably adds some excitement to the activity.

Once each student has been stationed in a couplet, the teacher displays a question using the overhead projector. The question should be light enough to be answered relatively quickly but deep enough to offer some opportunity for elaboration. The best questions prompt

creative responses. Students are given a specific length of time to discuss the question, and if the teacher would like to offer students more opportunity for in-depth discussion, he can lengthen the discussion time to what is appropriate. Each student must answer the question with an adequate explanation. Ideally each student speaks for approximately one-half of the allotted time. At the completion of the time, the teacher randomly asks students around the room what the other student in his couplet had said. This is extremely vital because it means that each student must listen carefully to the other. After the teacher has elicited responses from about four or five students (varying more and less proficient students), he then signals the interior students to advance to the next interior station (clockwise or counterclockwise as the teacher had previously decided). The students in the exterior stations remain seated.

The teacher then produces a new question which the students discuss for a period of time and at the end of that time, the teacher again asks four or five random students to offer their partner's answer to the question. This process should be repeated eight to ten times.

Here are some examples of good questions:

1. What did you fear as a child, which you no longer fear and why?
2. What is the best gift you have ever received? Explain.
3. If you were a food what would you be? Why?
4. What superpower would you like to have and what would you do with it?
5. If you were stranded on a desert island what three things would you like to have with you?
6. What is your greatest talent? Explain.
7. What four items can always be found in your refrigerator? Why?
8. What do you treasure more than anything else?
9. What makes you angry? Why?
10. If you knew you only had six months to live what would you do? Why?

The questions should be directed enough to provide strong structure to the conversation while offering enough opportunity for creative and humorous responses. Participants should feel an invitation to answer the questions with a broad range of responses. Questions which elicit predictable answers or a narrow range of answers should be avoided as they dull the sense of surprise and shock in this activity. In addition, in a single class session, it is best to provide eight structured questions and then afford students the opportunity to create their own questions within their couplets. The

teacher will then ask students to share their question and the answer their partner offered.

#### **4. What does the teaching experience show?**

SS provides the following benefits with other positive advantages:

1. The greatest benefit of SS is its rapid pace. This keeps the students' minds stimulated and alert. Each student knows that s/he must think quickly and clearly in order to accomplish the task at hand. The rapid pace tends to create energy in the classroom, with the anticipation of surprising and intriguing answers.
2. The interior students are required to rise and walk after each question/answer session. This injects energy into the room as physical movement tends to function as a stimulant.
3. There is a sense of excitement in meeting other students in class. This activity gets students out of their social cliques, breaks down walls of distrust, and fosters classroom camaraderie. Students tend to welcome the opportunity to meet others face-to-face, if even for only one minute.
4. EFL learners are deeply afraid to speak in front of a class, generally for fear of being criticized or mocked. SS

offers a safe haven for discussion since one only speaks with a partner. This allows many students to simultaneously practice at the same time in a situation that offers little or no threat, thus helping them build confidence in speaking English.

5. Another great benefit of SS is that it makes full use of precious class time. It allows the entire class to speak and listen at the same time in a structured and evaluated activity. This maintains the maximum level of student participation.
6. SS offers the potential to open up opportunities for speaking English, for which learners are engaged and therefore open to new and relevant linguistic features. The questions provide fixed phrases and the process of interaction stimulates spontaneous spoken discourse, thus helping learners accumulate more words. Teachers are aware of setting clear aims, evaluating the functions and forms, idealizing the process and the possible outcome, and providing a platform for creative interaction, which is also the aim in teaching speaking described by the researchers (Chappell, 2012, 2014).
7. SS causes learners to "notice" (Schmidt, 1990). It helps learners become active monitors of their own language production through listening

to peers' answers to the same topic and through having others monitor their oral production for any possibly entrenched errors.

The authors invited a subsample of twelve students<sup>2</sup> to an interview to elicit their opinions about this activity. All of the invited students genuinely liked this activity because it brought excitement to the class. It felt like an adventure and uncovered a mystery. Students are generally eager to escape their social fiefdoms, to build new bridges, to interact with new voices. They all regard it as a good center point from which they can build their skills while making new friends at the same time. We summarized three excerpts (also translated from Mandarin).

Excerpt 1

*The benefit of this activity is that I can gain more cultural knowledge, especially the western culture. For example, before this activity, I would never know that British drink tea the most in the world.* - Jennifer

Excerpt 2

*I can quickly learn some words from this activity. It captures my attention so as to focus on some unfamiliar words or previously known words. For example, when my partner used a word that I*

*remembered at that moment, it helped me review the word.* - Kevin

Excerpt 3

*I think this activity provided me with a platform to talk with a partner who is a better speaker than I am. Although I am scared to talk in English with a good student, I am happy to speak English with him/her in this activity.* - John

### 5. Critical Look at Speed Speaking

There are always some problems related to a new activity. Speed Speaking is no exception. Some problems are listed below.

Initially, students are very confused about how SS is supposed to work. They often wrongly assume that they will speak in a single couplet for the entire class session. The teacher should walk students through the process slowly and methodically.

When responding to a question students may offer a one-word response with no explanation. When the teacher asks a student to share what his partner said, that student may have no details to share. It must therefore be impressed upon students to prod their partners for a detailed answer.

Sometimes students may say nothing and simply write an answer which they

exchange with their partner, or they secretly speak in their native language. When called upon to speak, the student merely reads what his partner wrote. The teacher should try to evaluate the whole process in order to avoid this.

## 6. Future application of Speed

### Speaking

There are myriad future applications of SS. The following are a few examples.

Exterior station students can be assigned a homework assignment to bring in a picture which interior station students are asked to speak about for one minute.

Exterior station students offer discussion and commentary as well as keep notes on the responses received. After each interior student has interacted with each exterior student, a competition is held. The exterior students are asked to vote on which interior student offered the best response to his picture. The interior students are then asked to vote on which exterior student had the best picture.

Students could be asked to discuss proverbs, tell stories, or conduct a mock job interview in their couplets. The more proficient students can then share this dialogue or storytelling with the class.

## 7. Conclusion

Our main job as teachers of foreign languages is to help students develop automaticity and fluency as well as a willingness to speak English with ease. While we may need to devote some time to teaching students some declarative knowledge, such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structures and lexical inferencing strategies, the bulk of our classroom time should be used to provide our students with activities, and the kind of practice in which they are actually involved, and which they enjoy. Including SS in regular class instruction in relation to every new topic enhances the students' thinking, social and English skills, as well as language competences. Students are learning to act in a more flexible and natural way and to explore the environment. SS allow teachers to create numerous opportunities for students to engage in more new topics, and by doing so, they recycle, refine, and expand their personal experiences (Teng & Wong, 2015). Following this, teachers lead students beyond what they know, can do well, or are already interested in. Apart from a few problems, SS is one of the most effective activities for teaching students to speak in their new language.

Note

1. Names have been changed to protect the identity of participants. attention, attitude, preparation, pronunciation, and willingness to talk.
2. The twelve participants for the interview include four advanced level, four intermediate level, and four low proficiency level students, assessed by teachers based on their overall

## References

- Beamer, L. & Varner, I. (2001). *Intercultural communication in the global workplace* 2nd ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw- Hill/ Irwin.
- Chappell, P. (2012). A sociocultural account of the role of imitation in instructed second language learning. *Journal of Linguistics and Language Teaching*, 3(1), 61-99.
- Chappell, P. (2014). Engaging learners: conversation- or dialogic-driven pedagogy? *ELT Journal*, 68(1), 1-11.
- Goh, C. M., & Burns, A. (2012). *Teaching speaking: A holistic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heritage, J. (2005). Conversation analysis and institutional talk. In K. L. Fitch & R. E. Sanders (Eds.), *Handbook of Language and Social Interaction* (pp.103-147). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Lee, E.J. (2013). Corrective feedback preferences and learner repair among advanced ESL students. *System*, 41(2), 217-230.
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned (3<sup>rd</sup> edition)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Luoma, S. (2004). *Assessing Speaking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O’Keeffe, A., McCarthy, M., & Carter, R. (2007). *From Corpus to Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J.C. (2008). *Teaching listening and speaking: From theory to practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics*, 11, 129–159.
- Teng, F. (2014). Incidental vocabulary learning by assessing frequency of word occurrence in a Graded Reader: Love or money. *LEARN Journal*, 7(2), 36-50.

Teng, F., & Wong, J. (2015). Applying Speed Speaking into the foreign language classroom. *Philippine ESL Journal*, 14, 50-70.

Thornbury, S. (2007). *How to teach speaking*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

---

<sup>i</sup> Corresponding author contact email: [u3034981@uni.canberra.edu.au](mailto:u3034981@uni.canberra.edu.au)