

Approaches to spontaneous speaking

Rationale

The 2016 GCSE in MFL subject content requires students to:

- *"communicate and interact effectively in speech for a variety of purposes across a range of specified contexts*
- *take part in a short conversation, asking and answering questions, and exchanging opinions*
- *convey information and narrate events coherently and confidently, using and adapting language for new purposes*
- *speak spontaneously, responding to unexpected questions, points of view or situations, sustaining communication by using rephrasing or repair strategies, as appropriate*
- *initiate and develop conversations and discussion, producing extended sequences of speech*
- *make appropriate and accurate use of a variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures, including some more complex forms, with reference to past, present and future events*
- *make creative and more complex use of the language, as appropriate, to express and justify their own thoughts and points of view*
- *use accurate pronunciation and intonation such as to be understood by a native speaker^{vi}*

What is spontaneous speaking?

Spontaneous talk is unscripted speech, in which teachers do not know exactly what language students will produce, and vice versa. The speaker, student or teacher, has something to say only as a result of having heard and understood what has been said to him/her. Spontaneous talk is therefore **both** listening and speaking; it is communicative language use, as distinct from language rehearsal.ⁱⁱ This talk may be learner-initiated or in response to a teacher's question. It may be within an oral talk or part of everyday communication between tasks. However it occurs, it will be produced not read, improvised not rehearsed, and it will often have that element of 'struggle'; the effort to communicate when linguistic resources are stretched.ⁱⁱⁱ

Why is it important?

These are the main reasons for focusing on spontaneous talk:

- Students equate the ability to speak in the target language with learning the language (it **is** the subject to them).
- Students believe that what they can produce in unrehearsed situations is what they really know.
- Spontaneous TL use (or lack of it) has been highlighted by Ofsted
- Theories of language learning prioritise interaction as the primary site of learning

Why is it difficult to achieve?

Ofsted inspection findings overwhelmingly describe classrooms as being characterised by students' inability and unwillingness to use the target language spontaneously: 'Overall there is insufficient emphasis on helping students to use the language spontaneously for real situations. Consequently too few students could speak creatively, or beyond the topic they were studying, by making up their own sentences in an unrehearsed situation.'^{iv}

A detailed reading and analysis of the literature in the field of target language use in classrooms in England^v suggests several reasons why students are not using the target language frequently or extensively enough. These include:

- low levels of teacher target language use (although we cannot assume that high levels of teacher target language use result automatically in high levels of student target language use)
- increased use of English tasks – ‘learning to learn’, ‘AfL’, ‘thinking skills’ – brought in with the KS3 National Strategy^{vi}
- a tension (perceived or otherwise) between grammar teaching and target language use
- a tension between teaching and assessment, recognising that previous incarnations of the GCSE examination rewarded memorisation over independent communication
- teacher-fronted talk that militates against learner talk
- the preclusion of the third ‘P’ (production/use) in PPP through an over-emphasis on pre-communicative, drilling activities.

This document suggests some strategies for encouraging spontaneous talk, based on Rachel Hawkes’ methodology^{vii}.

Strategies

Bearing in mind the cumulative nature of GCSE, both in terms of skills, and also grammar and vocabulary, promoting progression from KS2 and KS3, it is helpful for us to consider these talk strategies as a continuation of practice from earlier key stages. Another key point is that spontaneous or unplanned speaking can develop from planned speaking activities, as long as enough time is given to students to practise unsupported production, i.e. unscripted speaking. This is the notion that what students do today with support, they can do spontaneously tomorrow.

The following sections concern three aspects of classroom talk: the teacher role, student–teacher talk, and finally, student–student talk. In each section, the focus will be on practical strategies to improve target language talk, in terms of both teacher and student language use.

The teacher role

When considering strategies to increase students’ spontaneity in speaking, it is useful to consider teacher use of TL in the classroom, and how this can be used to support learners as they try to make themselves understood. This is important because teachers are uniquely placed to create very particular interactions with students that provide learning opportunities that are not to be found, in the same way, in pair and group work.

These interactions should ideally have the following features^{viii}:

- hand over the role of primary knower to the student; that is to say, the communicative impetus must be with the learner at times in the interaction (*Que penses-tu? Quel est ton avis? Pourquoi? Comment?*).
- have a predominance of open questions so that, even when closed in form, questions are open in function (e.g. *Comment s’appelle-t-il?* can be an open question when the class is hypothesising about the identity of an unknown person in a photo stimulus).
- feature conversational responses to learner utterances, characterised by an interested tone of voice, phatic echoes, repetitions with raised intonation, and exclamations (*Ah bon? C’est à dire ...? Vas-y. D’accord ...*).
- help to ‘buy’ learners time to construct their response; the teacher holds the interactional frame and fills pauses with padding (*Alors ...* + repetition of question/rewording).
- contain any correction with implicit re-casts, so that the conversational frame remains intact for as long as possible.
- include humour, both from teacher and students.

- be inviting; students need to want to take part, to feel they can initiate and take part. The teacher needs to solicit learner opinions and contributions actively (*C'est à vous. Qu'en dites-vous?*).
- include (ideally) a stable topic of conversation, but allow for the unpredictability of individual contributions: the unpredictability retains the interest of learners and provides opportunities for noticing, whilst the stability gives learners time to process for meaning and to think about their own contributions.

Student – teacher talk

Much of the target language that students routinely need to use in the classroom can be predicted. It can therefore be integrated into schemes of work and taught over time in the same way as any other language input. The teacher then needs to insist that students use it whenever the opportunity arises. The key word is 'insist'! There is no magic to this. Given the choice, students will revert to using English, as it requires less effort to do so. Therefore it is the teacher who needs to be consistent in reinforcing the expectation to use the target language.

Student – student talk

Much of this talk is accomplished through specific speaking tasks. There are many speaking tasks that generate spontaneous talk. Here are just a few suggestions:

Target talk

Students are given a question and a target number of words to use in their answer. For the first question, they must answer with the exact number of words in the target. The second question has the condition of a minimum number of words, which could be eight, nine, ten, or whatever is felt appropriate to the class. The conditions or 'targets' can be many and varied. It almost doesn't matter what they are, as the point of putting a condition there is to cause students to think their sentences through carefully as they build them. It makes them much more aware of what they're saying. Also, making a sentence of exactly seven words will usually involve a very short clause with a simple connective, or several items in a list. A higher target will push students to produce an extended answer, with a reason and/or justification, or additional details.

Spend the words

This task can be configured in lots of different ways, but the essential premise is that students have to have a conversation on a theme (they can be given specific questions, as appropriate, or more freedom to frame the questions themselves). Note that the simplest way for beginner learners to structure their own conversation is to make a statement and then ask for someone else's view.

In the course of the conversation, students need to try to use up all the words they have been given. They can be given all the words on one sheet and tasked to work collaboratively as a group, or can be given a set of word cards each: in this context, they have to 'spend' their own words, putting them in the centre of the table as they do so.

In this way, the task can be made collaborative or competitive, as appropriate to the group lesson.

Speaking line

There is empirical evidence in support of the benefits of repeating speaking tasks immediately^x. The teacher or students can choose the level of support the first time around, the aim being to decrease the amount of written support (bullets → individual words → pictures → nothing) each time the speaker moves to a new partner.

Say something else

Students are presented with a few sentences and have to change something in the sentence – it could be one detail, it could be the whole thing, or it could be adding an additional detail to 'grow' the sentence.

This task is particularly useful with more experienced classes as a warm-up before launching into a more independent speaking activity. The level of challenge and spontaneity required can be increased by asking students to change one element of the sentence they have just heard, rather than returning to the original written sentence each time.

Picture talk

There are many ways to exploit pictures. One of the best things about pictures is that they allow teachers to ask closed questions which function as open questions, and which can have multiple 'correct' answers. A question as simple as 'What is he/she called?' functions as an open question when the person is unknown. In the absence of known answers, students are free to create identities and, therefore, to use the language they know.



Photo credit: Shutterstock / ARENA Creative

Comment s'appelle-t-elle?
 Quel âge a-t-elle?
 Elle est comment?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle a comme famille?
 Elle a des animaux?
 Où est-ce qu'elle habite?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle aime faire?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle n'aime pas faire?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle a regardé hier soir à la télé?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle a fait hier?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle a à la main?
 Elle parle avec qui?
 Les amis sont importants dans la vie?
 Un bon ami / une bonne amie, c'est comment?
 Qu'est-ce qu'elle veut faire ce soir?
 À l'avenir?^x

It is straightforward to adapt pictures to the current topic of study, and to differentiate and direct questioning such that every student develops his/her speaking appropriately. Operating in this 'imaginary frame' also makes it easy to include several time frames within one task, requiring students to manipulate language to making meaning in different tenses, a requirement of the new GCSE speaking exam at both tiers.

It is useful to remember how much potential talk can also be generated by asking questions in the negative. For example: in response to a photo of a girl on holiday in Spain, the answer to the question, 'Where did she go on holiday?', will not elicit as many responses as, 'Where didn't she go on holiday?', where students are free to name any other location they can produce in the target language.

The inclusion of a picture-based task in the GCSE speaking exam makes the use of pictures in the classroom is now even more relevant.

Practice

Please refer to the sample assessment materials for speaking, on the Edexcel website, for practice activities.

ⁱModern foreign languages GCSE subject content (DfE, 2014)

www.gov.uk/government/publications

Reference: DFE-00348-2014

-
- ii 'Thirty years of change'. Jones, B. (2002). In A. Swarbrick (ed.) *Teaching Modern Foreign Languages in secondary schools* (44–64), London: Routledge Falmer.
- iii *Learning to talk and talking to learn: how spontaneous teacher–learner interaction in the secondary foreign languages classroom provides greater opportunities for L2 learning*. Hawkes, R. (2012) Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.
- iv *The changing landscape of languages: an evaluation of language learning 2004/2007*. Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) (2008) London: HMSO.
- v *Learning to talk and talking to learn: how spontaneous teacher–learner interaction in the secondary foreign languages classroom provides greater opportunities for L2 learning*. Hawkes, R. (2012) Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge.
- vi *Key Stage 3 National Strategy: Literacy across the curriculum*. DFEE (2001). London: Department for Education and Employment.
- vii *Translation, Literary Texts and Classroom Talk toolkit for Studio KS3 French, Stimmt KS3 German and Viva KS3 Spanish* - by Rachel Hawkes (Pearson, 2015)
- viii 'A case of exercising: effects of immediate task repetition'. Lynch, D. and Maclean, J. (2001) in M. Bygate, P. Skehan and M. Swain (eds) *Researching pedagogic tasks: second language learning, teaching and testing*, London: Routledge (141–162).
- ix *Translation, Literary Texts and Classroom Talk toolkit for Studio KS3 French, Stimmt KS3 German and Viva KS3 Spanish* - by Rachel Hawkes (Pearson, 2015).
- x Pearson Edexcel Level 1/Level 2 GCSE (9-1) in Spanish – Specification – Draft 1.0 – April 2015 © Pearson Education Limited 2015