



“PROSPECTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSIVE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS”

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IMPROVING SECOND-YEAR STUDENTS' ORAL COMPETENCE: A DETAILED DESCRIPTIVE EXPLORATION

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Abstract: This article examines ways to improve oral competence in second-year university EFL students. It highlights common challenges such as fear of mistakes and lack of confidence, and emphasizes the importance of supportive classroom environments, interactive speaking tasks, teacher guidance, and technology. The study concludes that consistent practice in a safe, encouraging setting helps students become more confident and fluent English speakers.

Key words: oral competence, speaking skills, students, classroom interaction, anxiety, communicative activities.

In a university classroom, a group of second-year students settles into their seats. The walls, adorned with motivational posters, reflect a blend of expectations and apprehension. As the English teacher prepares to introduce a speaking task, the mood shifts from anticipation to quiet tension. These students, who have already navigated through basic grammar and vocabulary lessons, now face the next milestone in their language journey: improving their oral competence. However, for many, speaking in English remains a formidable challenge despite their linguistic knowledge. This article explores the complexities of improving oral competence in second-year students, the emotional and practical barriers they encounter, and the strategies that can help them overcome these challenges.

A second-year language classroom is a pivotal space where students find themselves in a transitional phase of language acquisition. They have a solid understanding of grammatical structures, tenses, and sentence construction. However, converting these knowledge structures into spontaneous, fluent speech often remains elusive. It's common to see students hesitating, searching for the right words, and shrinking back when asked to speak in front of their peers. The silence during speaking activities is thick with anxiety. Students' internal struggles become apparent through their non-verbal cues. Some glance nervously at their notes, others avoid eye contact with the teacher, and a few seem to shrink into their seats, dreading the moment they must speak aloud. This hesitation, fueled by a fear of making mistakes, is a critical barrier to developing oral competence [4].

The emotional weight students carry in the classroom includes:

Fear of judgment: "What if they laugh at my accent?"

Fear of making mistakes: "What if I say it wrong?"

Fear of forgetting vocabulary: "What if I can't think of the word I need?"

These fears can paralyze students, preventing them from engaging in meaningful oral communication. To address these challenges, the classroom must be a space where students feel safe to make mistakes and explore language freely [6].

Understanding the Challenges of Oral Competence

Oral competence involves several interconnected skills as fluency, accuracy, pronunciation, interaction, confidence. For many second-year students, these skills are not yet fully developed. While they may have internalized grammar rules and can perform well in written exams, the shift to verbal expression often feels overwhelming. Speaking requires not only cognitive skill but also emotional readiness to be vulnerable and express oneself in a second language [6]. Hence, the teacher's role in guiding students through these challenges is paramount.

Creating a Supportive and Engaging Environment

The first step in improving oral competence is to create a classroom atmosphere that encourages risk-taking and communication. Instead of the traditional arrangement where students face the front of the room, the desks are arranged in small circles. This layout fosters a sense of community and removes the "front-and-center" anxiety. The students are now facing each other, ready to engage.

On the table in front of them are topic cards: “Describe your perfect vacation,” “Talk about your favorite book,” or “What would you do if you had a week off?” The teacher’s instructions are simple but powerful: “There are no wrong answers. The goal is to speak, not to be perfect.”

As the activity begins, the initial awkwardness gradually dissipates. Students begin to speak hesitantly at first but soon find their rhythm. A student speaks about their last holiday, another about a memorable event in their hometown, and before long, the class buzzes with conversation. Mistakes are met with encouragement rather than correction, allowing students to express themselves more freely [2].

To ensure that students move beyond mere conversation starters and into more substantive communication, teachers must introduce activities that promote genuine interaction. There are some activities that have proven effective: role plays, information gap tasks, storytelling circles, debates and discussions. Each of these activities engages students in a way that goes beyond rote memorization. They are encouraged to use language dynamically – to persuade, describe, explain, and negotiate. Over time, these tasks build their confidence and fluency.

The Teacher’s Role

The teacher serves as both a facilitator and a guide in this process. By creating an environment where speaking is encouraged and mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process, the teacher helps students move beyond their anxieties [7,121]. In addition to creating the right environment, the teacher models appropriate language use, corrects mistakes gently, and provides constructive feedback. Rather than focusing on every error, the teacher highlights positive language use and offers tips for improvement:

“You did a great job using past tense in your story! Next time, try stressing that word a bit more.”

“Well done on expressing your opinion clearly. Maybe try using a more varied vocabulary next time.”

This kind of feedback empowers students to focus on their progress rather than their shortcomings.

Conclusion

Over the course of a semester, the transformation in students’ oral competence becomes evident. The once-timid students who hesitated to speak now engage confidently in conversations, share their ideas with the class, and participate actively in group activities. The growth is gradual, but the results are powerful. With the right balance of encouragement, structured tasks, and a supportive classroom environment, students begin to realize that speaking in English is not only possible but enjoyable. Improving oral competence in second-year students is not about forcing them to speak; it is about creating opportunities for them to express themselves freely. By building a classroom that fosters communication, offering meaningful speaking tasks, and supporting students with both feedback and technology, teachers can help students find their voice in English and communicate with clarity, confidence, and pride.

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