The Art of Teaching Speaking
Keith S. Folse

Book Review

To truly learn a language does not mean learning just the rules and sentence parts, but getting a feeling for beauty and meaning. Language is a vast sea of cultural ideas, creative expressions, and complex meanings. To handle these intricate and powerful ideas, and to get to the beautiful, meaningful nature of language, what’s most needed is art, not structure. Learning a language is really learning the art of conversation. People who learn languages well are usually not so good at grammar; but they are always very good at conversation. They know the art of conversation, a skill that involves basic human qualities: an interest in people, the ability to listen carefully and ask good questions, and a degree of personal warmth. That is the art. This human art of conversation is not easy to teach. Grammar is much easier, since it is condensable into worksheets and right and wrong answers for tests. Grammar has a definite starting and stopping point, and can be handled with efficiency and order. Art, however, is subjective, messy and undefined. Art takes a long time to set up and get going, and is hard to stop just because the bell rings for the next class.

*The Art of Teaching Speaking, by Keith S. Folse,* is a book about how to achieve these goals in Conversation classes. In Introduction part of the book, author gives 3 major advices for effectively teaching speaking:

1. To keep the students’ discipline issues in check by keeping them busy with active and engaging pair work or small group work.

2. The type of activity that really engages the students in real, life-like, conversational activities should depend very much on their English level.

3. It is important to keep in mind that a conversation topic or activity that worked really well with one age group or gender does not necessarily work well with those from another.

In chapter 1, author shows some factors in planning and teaching a conversation class. As in many successful teaching classes, the quality of the planning affects the results. Hence, with careful planning and necessary information, we will
ensure that we achieve the lesson objective and produce the desired learning outcome in our students. Basically in our planning several factors are to be considered:

1. The learner, including the learner's age, proficiency level, and goals
2. The program or school, since most teachers follow a curriculum with set steps
3. The topic being discussed
4. The two “languages”: a) in the task; b) for the task
5. The activity or task that serves as the vehicle for conversation

In chapter 2, we had been familiarized with six key terms in second language research and pedagogy regarding speaking skills: fluency versus accuracy, interlanguage, comprehensible input, pushed output, and negotiation of meaning. Fluency is basically the ability to communicate (understand and be understood), whereas accuracy is whether or not you make mistakes. Despite the fact that some arguments show that accuracy is essential for learners to acquire linguistic form to produce the language, this is not enough.

Fluency is still needed considering the language implementation in an authentic environment. Whether to focus more on accuracy or fluency depends on learners' needs and course objectives. Author states, that an obvious way to improve students' speaking skills is through actual speaking, and this can be done through well-designed fluency tasks.

He also states, that an obvious goal of an effective speaking activity is that it will allow students to discuss a certain topic. However, a less apparent but potentially more important goal is that all participants stretch their interlanguage. According to Selinker (1972), learners utilize various interlanguage strategies in an attempt to learn and use a second language to communicate. It against this background that the present study sought to identify and examine the interlanguage strategies the learners use in an attempt to overcome the difficulty of using a language they have little ability in.

Comprehensible input is related to more than just language development and curriculum content. Appropriate context is crucial. One way for teachers to be sensitive to the language and cultural backgrounds of their English-language learners with learning difficulties is to provide instruction that draws on the experiences of their students. This does not mean that teachers have to be experts in their students' cultures, but they do have to understand how effective it can be to connect students' learning to their past experiences. Such understanding can often be gained by listening carefully
and attentively to students. Teachers must constantly involve students, ask many questions, and encourage students to express their ideas and thoughts in the new language. One strategy for motivating students is to give them opportunities to share their language, culture, country, and experiences. Opportunities to use language orally creates, in turn, opportunities to increase receptive language skills. When input is comprehensible, students understand most aspects of what is required for learning, and the learning experience pushes them to greater understanding.

The idea of pushed output arose as a response to Krashen's suggestion that a learner could acquire language as a result of being surrounded by comprehensible input. Swain (1995) and others presented the belief that in addition to receiving input, a learner must also be pushed to produce language. The production in necessary because it forces the learner to notice, process, and test language features.

When communicating, speakers often experience considerable difficulty when their resources in their foreign or native language are limited. A major feature of conversation involving L2 learners is that the learner and native speaker together strive to overcome the communicating difficulties which are always likely to arise as a result of the learner’s limited L2 resources. This has become known as the negotiation of meaning. The result of the negotiation of meaning is that particular types of input and interaction result. In particular, it has been hypothesized that negotiation makes input comprehensible and in this way promotes L2 acquisition.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the image of conversation classes. There is not any standard for such classes. From the cases we have looked through, we can say conversation classes will vary by country, by students proficiency level, and even by the nature of a given group of students.

In chapter 4, author presents some activities which he used successfully in both ESL and EFL groups. However, he states, that the suitability of using these activities depends on students, their needs, their personalities, and their proficiency. The activities can range from simple activities such as language games or repetition drills for pronunciation to more complex group discussions of controversial topics with differing levels of original student talk in between. The activities explained in this chapter represent this full gamut and are listed here in no special order.

Chapter 5, gives a clear insight about unsuccessful activities that don't work well during speaking classes. While planning our lessons and setting the objectives we always should think about activities we are going to use during the class. Sometimes,
using the inappropriate or weak activities can not give us the results we were expecting to. Students may not be interested, or just be too silent. Author, shows some ineffective and even detrimental activities that teachers used in their classes and explains the reasons why it failed.

For the longest time, the idea of testing language have always revolved around testing the knowledge of the language itself but now, the idea of testing for communicative competence is getting more and more popular. As teachers of EFL, it is imperative for us to enhance the students’ delivery skills, increase their confidence, and develop their methods of organization and critical thinking skills. In order to do this, a valid and reliable way of assessment to determine whether the set of goals were met is required. Speaking is probably one of the most difficult skills to test. In chapter 6, author explains three stages of assessment: pre-instruction, during instruction, and post-instruction. Each of these phases can provide both the teacher and the learner with a more accurate and perhaps more objective picture of the learning (and teaching) experience.

The appendices given at the end of the book are also very helpful for both ESL and EFL teachers. Important information about vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar is essential for teaching speaking. Samples of successful lesson plans show how to organize classes, use activities and so on.

Teaching speaking is a very important part of foreign language learning. The ability to communicate in a foreign language clearly and efficiently contributes to the success of the learner in school and success later in every phase of life. Therefore, it is essential that language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking. Rather than leading students to pure memorization, providing a rich environment, where meaningful communication takes place is desired. With this aim, various speaking activities, such as those explained in this book, can contribute a great deal to students in developing basic interactive skills necessary for life. These activities make students more active in the learning process and at the same time make their learning more meaningful and fun for them.