Developing Spoken English Skills

Regularly communicating with native English speakers on a varying degree of topics is the best way to learn to speak English fluently. However, relatively few learners of English have such an opportunity. To eventually be able to speak English fluently, learners of English must have materials with important content on everyday topics (audios, videos, printed texts/study books, etc.) for beginner, intermediate and advanced levels of study. The materials must include dialogues, monologues, questions - answers with important content, lists of difficult word meanings and phrases/expressions with usage sentences, and comprehensive vocabulary on all everyday topics. Learners can practice and develop spoken English skills in many ways. Here are some possible ideas:

1. Under the teacher’s guidance, ESL/EFL learners listen to and pronounce each sentence of English speech (dialogues and narrative texts with transcripts). It is helpful for learners of English to read (pronounce) each sentence aloud and to compare their pronunciation to the narrator’s pronunciation. A teacher can make sure that learners understand everything clearly in each sentence in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.

2. A teacher helps learners practice speaking on a topic (telling the content of a dialogue or a narrative text as close to the original text as much as possible: imitation of a dialogue (role-play) and narration of a text on the topic). A teacher can write key words and phrases, or main ideas as a plan, or questions in the dialogue or text learners listened to previously in order to make it easier for learners to tell the content in English. It is important to compare what they said to the transcript. It is a good idea for learners to record their speech on audio to compare it with the original audio recording. The most important thing for learners is to speak English, and to check in the transcript of texts whether they have made any mistakes in speaking. There are English conversation books and websites with thematic dialogues and narrative/informative texts on various topics to practice speaking in English.

3. It is useful for teachers and ESL/EFL learners to prepare potential questions and answers with helpful content on everyday topics, and to practice speaking. To show different ways of expressing a particular thought they can make up several potential questions and answers on one point in this speaking activity. There are some books with spoken English activities for teachers’ use in the classroom that include imitation of dialogues (role play), ready-made questions with up-to-date relevant content for daily living, narrations/telling stories, talking points, discussions of issues, games, etc.

4. Extensive reading of thematic texts and materials from various sources. ESL/EFL learners should write down vocabulary they do not know into sentences to help them understand and remember the words. To help students improve their speaking ability, they should practice telling the content of a text to someone after they have read it. Learners should write the phrases and key words as well as ideas in a plan. They can also try to invent long answer questions for the text to help them to talk about the content. It may also prove wise to read each paragraph separately and then read the text as a whole.

Therefore, an effective way for learners to improve their vocabulary skills would be by reading thematic texts. They can start by choosing books about everyday topics that contain content of importance, such as advice and tips about making everyday life better or easier. Also, texts that provide real solutions to problems we face every day. These self-help texts can be found in bookshops, the Internet and public libraries.
5. Learning of additional conversation sentences and vocabulary from English phrase books, conversation books and English dictionaries. Quality English dictionaries give easy to understand explanations and sentences for each word. This can be extremely useful for the learner. It is also helpful for students of English to create their own sentences with vocabulary they are less familiar with. They should think about the situations they face in real life and try to incorporate the vocabulary into the given situation.

6. It would be very useful for learners of English to make word lists containing words with meanings that are hard to understand with usage sentences from English phrase books and general English dictionaries. Learners should drill the ready-made sentences repeatedly as this helps learners remember difficult word meanings. This issue is thoroughly covered in the Longman Language Activator Dictionary. It would also be very practical for learners to create sentences of their own with that vocabulary for potential personal use, taking into account the real life situations they face. As you know, word combinations in speaking are unpredictable. There are different word phrases, expressions and synonyms to convey a thought in English.

It is possible to encompass in ready-made materials a wide variety of English phrases for each conversation topic. It is a worthwhile idea to prepare a potential list of phrases with sentences on each conversation topic, for example fixed conversational phrases that do not require English grammar knowledge (greetings, forms of addressing a person, thanks, well-wishing, apologies, agreeing, disagreeing, and emotions). Practicing English with such materials can help a learner easily choose the most appropriate word combinations to convey a thought.

Multiple frequent reading of such sentences in English will gradually ensure firm memorization of English vocabulary and contribute to developing good speaking skills. By combining the most inclusive English phrase books, conversation books, general English thematic dictionaries, software, audio and video aids and websites you can create the most practical and thorough content for mastering each conversation topic in English for all levels including a wide selection of ready-to-use phrases, vocabulary and sentences for daily use. Your own ready-made materials could be more complete and more helpful than any conversation book or a phrase book in terms of useful comprehensive content and vocabulary.

7. Frequent revision of material ensures solid knowledge and success in learning. It is important that ESL/EFL learners make use of various aids on many daily life topics to improve their English language skills: audios, videos (English learning videos, travel videos, etc.), Internet resources, English (learning) magazines, newspapers, newsletters, radio programmes (especially the BBC English learning programmes/materials), TV programmes (educational programmes, documentary films, movies, news), books and e-books on a variety of subjects, online communication with native English speakers (chat, email, Skype). Good public libraries and the Internet have a wide selection of English learning aids.

Written by Michael Shelby