Teaching speaking

➢ Unit one: Successful oral fluency practice

Of all the four skills, speaking seems intuitively the most important: people who know a language referred to as “speakers” of that language, as if speaking included all other kinds of knowing; and many if not most foreign language learners are primarily interested in learning to speak.

Classroom activities that develop learners’ ability to express themselves through speech would therefore seem an important component of a language course. Yet it is difficult to design and administer such activities; more so, in many ways, that to do so for listening, reading or writing. We shall come on to what the problems are presently, but first let us try to define what is meant by “an effective speaking activity”.

Question: Imagine or recall a successful speaking activity in the classroom that you have either organized as teacher or participated in as student. What are the characteristics of this activity that make you judge it ‘successful’? Compare your ideas with those shown in Box 9.1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOX 9.1 CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL SPEAKING ACTIVITY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learners talk a lot. As much as possible of the period of time allotted to the activity is in fact occupied by learner talk. This may seem obvious, but often most time is taken up with teacher talk or pauses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Participation is even. Classroom discussion is not dominated by a minority of talkative participants; all get a chance to speak, and contributions are fairly evenly distributed.</td>
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<td>3. Motivation is high. Learners are eager to speak: because they are interested in the topic and have something new to say about it, or because they want to contribute to achieving a task objective.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Language is of an acceptable level. Learners express themselves in utterances that are relevant, easily comprehensible to each other, and of an acceptable level of language accuracy.</td>
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In practice, however, few classroom activities succeed in satisfying all the criteria sown in box 9.1...
**Question:** What are some of the problems in getting learners to talk in the classroom? Perhaps think back to your experiences as either learner or teacher. Now look at Box 9.2, and see if any of the problems I have come across in my teaching are the same as yours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOX 9.2</th>
<th>PROBLEMS WITH SPEAKING ACTIVITIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. <strong>Inhibition.</strong> Unlike reading, writing and listening activities, speaking requires some degree of real-time exposure to an audience. Learners are often inhibited about trying to say things in a foreign language in the classroom; worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism or losing face, or simply shy of the attention that their speech attracts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. <strong>Nothing to say.</strong> Even if they are not inhibited, you often hear learners complain that they cannot think of anything to say; they have no motive to express themselves beyond the guilty feeling that they should be speaking.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. <strong>Low or uneven participation.</strong> Only one participant can talk at a time if he or she is to be heard; and in a large group this means that each one will have only very little talking time. This problem is compounded by the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all.</td>
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<td>4. <strong>Mother-tongue use.</strong> In classes where all, or a number of, the learners share the same mother tongue, they may tend to use it: because it is easier, because it feels unnatural to speak to one another in a foreign language, and because they feel less “exposed” if they are speaking their mother tongue. If they are talking in small groups it can be quite difficult to get some classes – particularly the less disciplined or motivated ones – to keep to the target language.</td>
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**What the teacher can do to help to solve some of the problems**

1. **Use group work**

   This increases the sheer amount of learner talk going on in a limited period of time and also lowers the inhibitions of learners who are unwilling to speak in front of the full class. It is true that group work means the teacher cannot supervise all learner speech, so that not all utterances will be correct, and learners may occasionally slip into their native language; nevertheless, even taking into consideration occasional mistakes and mother-tongue use, the amount of time remaining for positive, useful oral practice is still likely to be far more than in the full-class set-up.
2. Base the activity on easy language

In general, the level of language needed for a discussion should be lower than that used in intensive language-learning activities in the same class; it should be easily recalled and produced by the participants, so that they can speak fluently with the minimum of hesitation. It is a good idea to teach or review essential vocabulary before the activity starts.

3. Make a careful choice of topic and task to stimulate interest

On the whole, the clearer the purpose of the discussion the more motivated participants will be.

4. Give some instruction or training in discussion skills

If the task is based on group discussion then include instructions about participation when introducing it. For example, tell learners to make sure that everyone in the group contributes to the discussion; appoint a chairperson to each group who will regulate participation.

5. Keep students speaking the target language

You might appoint one of the group as monitor, whose job it is to remind participants to use the target language, and perhaps report later to the teacher how well the group managed to keep to it. Even if there is no actual penalty attached, the very awareness that someone is monitoring such lapses helps participants to be more careful.

However, when all is said and done, the best way to keep students speaking the target language is simply to be there yourself as much as possible, reminding them and modelling the language use yourself: there is no substitute for nagging!

❖ Unit Two: The functions of topic and task

This unit looks at some key components that make for successful oral fluency activities.

Group experiment: Comparing two activities

Stage 1: Experience

In Box 9.3 is a description of two oral fluency activities. Try them out in small groups, one after the other, allowing about five minutes for each. During the activities, try - even if you are participating yourself- to keep an eye on how things are going: how much people are talking, the kind of language they are using, how interested and motivated they seem to be.

Stage 2: Comparing

Now compare the two: which was more successful in producing good oral fluency practice? If you felt that one was noticeably more successful than the other, can you put your finger on some of the reasons why? Was it the topic? The task? The organization?
Topic- and task-based activities

The main difference between the two activities in Box 9.3 is that the first is topic-based and the second task-based. In other words, the first simply asks participants to talk about a (controversial) subject, the main objective being clearly the discussion process itself; the second asks them actually to perform something, where the discussion process is a means to an end.

Topic. A good topic is one to which learners can relate using ideas from their own experience and knowledge; the 'ability-grouping' topic is therefore appropriate for most schoolchildren, schoolteachers or young people whose school memories are fresh. It should also represent a genuine controversy, in which participants are likely to be fairly evenly divided (as my own classes tend to be on this one). Some questions or suggested lines of thought can help to stimulate discussion, but not too many arguments for and against should be 'fed' to the class in advance: leave room for their own initiative and originality. A topic-centered discussion can be done as a formal debate, where a motion is proposed and opposed by prepared speakers, discussed further by members of the group, and finally voted on by all.
**Task.** A task is essentially goal-oriented: it requires the group, or pair, to achieve an objective that is usually expressed by an observable result, such as brief notes or lists, a rearrangement of jumbled items, a drawing, a spoken summary. This result should be attainable only by interaction between participants: so within the definition of the task you often find instructions such as 'reach a consensus', or 'find out everyone's opinion'. A task is often enhanced if there is some kind of visual focus to base the talking on: a picture, for example.

**Which is better?**

When I have done the above experiment with teachers the task-centered activity scores higher with most groups on all criteria: there is more talk, more even participation, more motivation and enjoyment. When asked why, participants say things like: 'I knew where I was going, there was some purpose in speaking'; 'It was a challenge - we were aware that time was running out and we had to get a result'; 'It was more like a game, we enjoyed it'.

Thus, as a generalization, it is probably advisable to base most oral fluency activities on tasks.

However, having said this, it is important to note that there is usually a small but significant minority who do prefer a topic-centered discussion: 'I found it more interesting: you can go into things more deeply without the pressure of having to reach a decision'; 'I like debating, exploring issues in free discussion'. Such learners also need to be catered for so occasional topic-centered discussions should be included in a balanced programme.

➤ **Unit Three: Discussion activities**

This unit presents a selection of discussion activities suitable for various levels.

**Task** Classroom- or peer-teaching: trying out activities

**Stage 1: Preparation**

The activities in Box 9.4 are laid out more or less in order of difficulty (of both language and task), the simplest first. Select one that seems appropriate for a class you teach, or may be teaching in the future, and, alone or with a colleague, discuss and note down how you expect this to work with them. How will you present it? Will all your students participate? Will they enjoy it? Can you foresee any particular problems?

**Stage 2: Experience**

Do the activity. If you cannot conveniently do so with learners, then try it out with a group of colleagues, where one of you role-plays the teacher and the rest are students.
Stage 3: Reflection

After finishing, discuss or think about your students' and your own performance. Otherwise, relate to the points listed in Box 9.1. Note that not all the ideas listed in Box 9.4 are necessarily good ones: some may have interesting weaknesses!

Box 9.4.
DISCUSSION ACTIVITIES
1. Describing pictures
Each group has a picture which all its members can see. They have two minutes to say as many sentences as they can that describe it; a 'secretary' marks a tick on a piece of paper representing each sentence. At the end of the two minutes, groups report how many ticks they have. They then repeat the exercise with the second picture, trying to get more ticks than the first time.
2. Picture differences
The students are in pairs; each member of the pair has a different picture (either A or B). Without showing each other their pictures they have to find out what the differences are between them.

A Describe your picture to B. Find ten differences.
In my picture a man and a woman are sitting outside. They are having coffee.

B Describe your picture to A. Find ten differences.
In my picture a man and a woman are sitting outside. They are having coffee.
3. Things in common
Students sit in pairs, preferably choosing as their partner someone they do not know very well. They talk to one another in order to find out as many things as they can that they have in common. These must be things that can only be discovered through talking - not obvious or visible characteristics like 'We are in the same class' or 'We both have blue eyes'. At the end they share their findings with the full class.

4. Shopping list
Imagine there is a miracle store that actually sells the commodities shown in the table below. The owners of this store will, however, only stock the items if they are convinced there is a demand. Students each choose three items they want to buy, and try to find for each at least three other 'buyers' - that is, students who have also chosen it. They mark the names of the other students in the appropriate column; if four people want an item, this is enough 'demand' to justify the owners of the store acquiring the stock. The aim is to get the owners to stock all the items you have chosen.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of commodity</th>
<th>Second buyer</th>
<th>Third buyer</th>
<th>Fourth buyer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. More free time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. An automatic house-cleaning robot</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Popularity</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. A job that involves travel abroad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Fame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. More patience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. A perfect figure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. More excitement in my life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Perfect health</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. A talent for making money</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Comments on the activities in Box 9.4

1. Describing pictures
   This is a simple but surprisingly productive activity for beginner classes. Make sure participants understand that it is only necessary for the secretary to put a tick for each contribution; some tend to assume that every sentence has to be written out - but this cuts down drastically the amount of talk possible. The second time round, with a new picture, the groups almost invariably break their previous record.

2. Picture differences
   A well-known activity which usually produces plenty of purposeful question-and-answer exchanges. The vocabulary needed is specific and fairly predictable; make sure it is known in advance, writing up new words on the board, though you may find you have to add to the list as the activity is going on. The problem here is the temptation to 'peep' at a partner's picture: your function during the activity may be mainly to stop people cheating! You may also need to drop hints to pairs that are 'stuck'.

3. Things in common
   An 'ice-breaking' activity, which fosters a feeling of solidarity by stressing shared characteristics of participants. At the end if all pairs tell the class everything they found, then the feedback gets a little tedious; it is better to ask a few volunteers to suggest selected ideas that they think are particularly original or pleasing.

4. Shopping list
   An imaginative, fun activity - but, as you will have found if you did it, actually rather sterile in the amount of talk it produces. Participants may simply ask each other 'One?' or 'Seven?', and answer 'Yes' or 'No'. One thing that helps is simply to delete the numbers on the left; another is to suggest to participants that they try to persuade each other to change their choices in order to agree on which to buy. The teacher can role-play the store-owner.

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5. Solving a problem
This is particularly suitable for people who are themselves adolescents, or involved with adolescent education, and is intended for fairly advanced learners. It usually works well, producing a high level of participation and motivation; as with many simulation tasks, participants tend to become personally involved: they begin to see the characters as real people, and to relate to the problem as an emotional issue as well as an intellectual and moral one. At the feedback stage, the resulting letters can be read aloud: this often produces further discussion.

Unit Four: Other kinds of spoken interaction

Structured task- or topic-based activities with clear goals are a good basis for classroom talk in the foreign language, particularly at elementary and intermediate levels. However, the kind of talking they give practice in is in some respects limited: more advanced learners may need a wider range of activity types. The extracts in Box 9.5 suggest some more kinds of oral interaction; study read on to the following Comment.

Comment: Different kinds of interaction
Discussion tasks tend to be based on transactional talk, short turns and fairly detached argument or persuasion. The main types of interaction which are discussed in the extracts in Box 9.5 and which tend to be neglected are: interactional talk; long turns; talk which is based on (non-classroom) situations, emotions and personal relationships.

1. Interactional talk
This is to some extent a matter of learning conventional formulae of courtesy: how to greet, take leave, begin and end conversations, apologize, thank and so on. But even more than this it is culture-linked: how the interactional function of speech is realized in different languages depends as much on cultural convention as on knowledge of the words of the language.

2. Long turns
The ability to speak at length is one which adult, more advanced or academic students will perhaps need and therefore needs cultivating; for other types of classes it may be less important.

3. Varied situations, feelings, relationships
It is certainly arguable that learners will need to function in a wide variety of such contexts, and it makes sense to give them opportunities to try using the target language in simulations of at least a selection of them. Conventional task-based discussions do not provide such opportunities; but, as the extract quoted here claims, role-play activities do - which is a cogent argument for including them in a language course.
BOX 9.5: TYPES OF SPOKEN DISCOURSE

Extract 1

*Interactional* uses of language are those in which the primary purposes for communication are social. The emphasis is on creating harmonious interactions between participants rather than on communicating information. The goal for the participants is to make social interaction comfortable and non-threatening and to communicate goodwill. Although information may be communicated in the process, the accurate and orderly presentation of information is not the primary purpose. Examples of interactional uses of language are greeting, making small talk, telling jokes, giving compliments, making casual 'chat' of the kind used to pass time with friends or to make encounters with strangers comfortable.

Brown and Yule (1983) suggest that language used in the interactional mode is *listener oriented*...

*Transactional* uses of language are those in which language is being used primarily for communicating information. They are 'message' oriented rather than 'listener' oriented. Accurate and coherent communication of the message is important, as well as confirmation that the message has been understood. Explicitness and directness of meaning is essential, in comparison with the vagueness of interactional language ... Examples of language being used primarily for a transactional purpose include news broadcasts, lectures, descriptions and instructions,


Extract 2

A short turn consists of only one or two utterances, a long turn consists of a string of utterances which may last as long as an hour's lecture ... What is demanded of a speaker in a long turn is considerably more demanding than what is required of a speaker in a short turn. As soon as a speaker 'takes the floor' for a long turn, tells an anecdote, tells a joke, explains how something works, justifies a position, describes an individual, and so on, he takes responsibility for creating a structured sequence of utterances which must help the listener to create a *coherent* mental representation of what he is trying to say. What the speaker says must be coherently structured...

The general point which needs to be made ... is that it is important that the teacher should realise that simply training the student to produce short turns will not automatically yield students who can perform satisfactorily in long turns.


Extract 3

The use of role play has added a tremendous number of possibilities for communication practice. Students are no longer limited to the kind of language used by learners in a classroom: they can be shopkeepers or spies, grandparents or children, authority figures or subordinates; they can be bold or frightened, irritated or amused, disapproving or affectionate; they can be in Buckingham Palace or on a ship or on the moon; they can be threatening, advising, apologising, condoling. The language can correspondingly vary along several parameters: according to the profession, status, personality, attitudes or mood of the character being role-played, according to the physical setting imagined, according to the communicative functions or purpose required,

Teaching these kinds of interaction in the classroom

1. Interactional talk
The way interactional talk is carried out in different languages is very culture-linked, and it is difficult to explain the conventions that govern it in a foreign language; it is dubious therefore whether it is worth investing very much effort in teaching and practising them. My own opinion is that given general language proficiency and a knowledge of the more obvious courtesy conventions, most learners will be able to cope adequately with interactional speech on the basis of their own cultural knowledge and common sense. Some kinds of role play can give opportunities for practicing it.

2. Long turns
Some activities that help students to practise speaking in long turns are:
- telling stories (well-known tales or personal anecdotes)
- telling jokes
- describing a person or place in detail
- recounting the plot of a film, play or book
- giving a short lecture or talk
- arguing a case for or against a proposal.

3. Varied situations, feelings, relationships
The obvious classroom activities to use here are those based on role play.

Unit Five: Role play and related techniques

It was suggested in one of the extracts quoted in the previous unit that one way to vary the kinds of spoken interaction that learners can experience in the classroom is the use of what is called 'role play'. Role play, in the above context, is used to refer to all sorts of activities where learners imagine themselves in a situation outside the classroom (as for example in Box 9.4, Activity 5), sometimes playing the role of someone other than themselves, and using language appropriate to this new context.

Dialogues
This is a traditional language-learning technique that has gone somewhat out of fashion in recent years. The learners are taught a brief dialogue which they learn by heart. For example:

A: Look, it's stopped raining!
B: So it has! Do you want to go out?
A: Yes, I've got a lot of shopping to do.
B: Right, let's go. Where do you want to go first?

They then perform it; privately in pairs, or publicly in front of the whole class. Learners can be asked to perform the dialogue in different ways: in different moods (sad, happy, irritated, bored, for example); in different role-relationships (a parent and child, wife
and husband, wheelchair patient and nurse, etc.). Then the actual words of the text can be varied: other ideas substituted (by teacher or learners) for 'shopping' or 'it's stopped raining', and the situation and the rest of the dialogue adapted accordingly. Finally, the learners can suggest a continuation: two (or more) additional utterances which carry the action further.

Particularly for beginners or the less confident, the dialogue is a good way to get learners to practise saying target-language utterances without hesitation and within a wide variety of contexts; and learning by heart increases the learner's vocabulary of ready-made combinations of words or 'formulae'.

**Plays**

These are an expansion of the dialogue technique, where a class learns and performs a play. This can be based on something they have read; or composed by them or the teacher; or an actual play from the literature of the target language. Rehearsals and other preparations are rather time-consuming, but the results can contribute a great deal both to learning and to learner confidence and morale. The production of a class play is perhaps most appropriate for the end of a course or a year's study, performed at a final party or celebration.

**Simulations**

In simulations the individual participants speak and react as themselves, but the group role, situation and task they are given is an imaginary one. For example:

> You are the managing committee of a special school for blind children. You want to organize a summer camp for the children, but your school budget is insufficient. Decide how you might raise the money.

They usually work in small groups, with no audience.

For learners who feel self-conscious about acting someone else, this type of activity is less demanding. But most such discussions do not usually allow much latitude for the use of language to express different emotions or relationships between speakers, or to use 'interactive' speech.

**Role play**

Participants are given a situation plus problem or task, as in simulations; but they are also allotted individual roles, which may be written out on cards. For example:

> ROLE CARD A: You are a customer in a cake shop. You want a birthday cake for a friend. He or she is very fond of chocolate.
> ROLE CARD B: You are a shop assistant in a cake shop. You have many kinds of cake, but not chocolate cake.

(Porter-Ladousse, 1987: 51)

Very often the role play is done in pairs, as in the above example; sometimes it involves interaction between five or six different roles.
Normally, the groups or pairs improvise their role play between themselves, simultaneously, with no audience. Sometimes, however, volunteers may perform their role plays later in front of the class. This is virtually the only way we can give our learners the opportunity to practise improvising a range of real-life spoken language in the classroom, and is an extremely effective technique if the students are confident and cooperative; but more inhibited or anxious people find role play difficult and sometimes even embarrassing. Factors that can contribute to a role play's success are: making sure that the language demanded is well within the learners' capacity; your own enthusiasm; careful and clear presentation and instructions. A preliminary demonstration or rehearsal by you together with a student volunteer can be very helpful.

➤ Unit Six: Oral testing

When testing the oral proficiency of learners we may simply interview them and assess their responses; or use other techniques like role play, group discussion between learners, monologue, picture-description and so on. But choosing an appropriate elicitation technique is only part of the problem; there are many other difficulties associated with design, administration and assessment. So serious are these difficulties, in fact, that most language exams either do not include oral testing techniques or give them very low weighting in the final grade.

This unit deals mainly with the question: to test or not to test? The main arguments for and against are displayed in Box 9.6, and read conclusions are summarized briefly at the end of the unit.

BOX 9.6: FOR AND AGAINST TESTING ORAL FLUENCY

For
1. In principle, a language test should include all aspects of language skill - including speaking.
2. Speaking is not just 'any skill' - it is arguably the most important, and therefore should take priority in any language test.
3. If you have an oral proficiency test at the end of a course, then this will have a 'backwash' effect: teachers and students will spend more time on developing speaking skills during the course itself. Conversely, if you do not have such a test they will tend to neglect them.
4. Students who speak well but write badly will be discriminated against if all, or most, of the test is based on writing.
Against

1. It is very difficult to design tests that get learners to improvise speech in the foreign language.
2. When answers to a test are written, assessors can check them carefully at their leisure; but speech flits past, and is very difficult to judge quickly, objectively and reliably. Recordings can be made; but this is liable to be prohibitively expensive and time-consuming.
3. There are no obvious criteria for assessment. Are you going to judge testees only on fluency? Or is accuracy going to play a part? And what about listening comprehension? 4. Even if you agree on criteria, some testers will be stricter in applying them, others more lenient. It will be difficult to get reliable, consistent assessment. 5. In oral testing each candidate has to be tested separately and individually, in real time; few institutions can afford the necessary investment of time and money.

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Conclusion

Oral testing is worth the investment: not so much for the sake of the overall validity of the proficiency test of which it is part, as for the sake of the backwash. An example: some years ago an oral component was introduced into the Israeli school-leaving exam, with a 20% weighting in the final grade; the immediate effect was a very noticeable rise in the emphasis on oral work in school classrooms and a corresponding improvement in learners' speaking skills.

This is not to say that there are not serious difficulties and criticisms of the test. One of the main problems is, of course, inter-rater (tester) reliability: the fact that since you need a very large number of testers, and it is difficult to ensure appropriate training for all of them, you are likely to get some variation in their assessments of testees' proficiency. This problem can, however, be mitigated by requiring testers to grade according to very explicit criteria (for an example, see the Notes).

More detailed information gained from professional research and materials development can be found in the literature: look at some of the articles and books listed under the last section of Further reading below.
Notes

Scale of oral testing criteria

The following scale is loosely based on that actually used in the Israeli exam mentioned in Unit Six. The candidates are tested on fluency and accuracy, and may get a maximum of five points on each of these two aspects, ten points in all.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accuracy</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Little or no language produced</td>
<td>Little or no communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor vocabulary, mistakes in basic grammar, may have very strong foreign accent</td>
<td>Very hesitant and brief utterances, sometimes difficult to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate but not rich vocabulary, makes obvious grammar mistakes, slight foreign accent</td>
<td>Gets ideas across, but hesitantly and briefly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good range of vocabulary, occasional grammar slips, slight foreign accent</td>
<td>Effective communication in short turns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wide vocabulary appropriately used, virtually no grammar mistakes, native-like or slight foreign accent</td>
<td>Easy and effective communication, uses long turns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL SCORE OUT OF 10:________________

Further reading

BACKGROUND


TEACHER'S HANDBOOKS, ARTICLES

Byrne, D. (1986) *Teaching Oral English* (2nd edn.), London: Longman. (A basic, readable teacher's guide, relating to oral work in a progression from presentation to practice to production; plenty of examples and teaching ideas)


(Brief practical guidelines; and an excellent collection of role play and "simulation techniques)


TESTING ORAL PROFICIENCY


(A clear, brief introduction to the issues: some ideas on how to test)


(An account of an oral test actually carried out with students: problems, solutions, conclusions)


(Readable, interesting; particularly good on elicitation techniques)