

MAXIMISING SPEAKING OPPORTUNITIES IN ONLINE LESSONS

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Introduction

Developing speaking skills in online lessons is different from in a face-to-face class, but it is still possible. A little creativity and imagination are needed on the part of the teacher and the learners. Learners also need to be guided on how to listen well to each other – having a task for them while listening will help this process.

Getting started

- With all the activities shared below, it's important to be clear about what specific language (vocabulary or grammar points) you want the learners to practise when you do each one. Think about how you can tailor the different ideas to suit different types of focus.
- Consider what tools you have access to – do you use a platform which has breakout rooms? If so, you can use these to do small-group speaking activities.
- Think about how you will give feedback on the speaking activities – are there certain criteria you can use each time? Do you need to give feedback to all students every lesson or can you focus on a few each time?
- When planning a speaking activity, think about how long the activity will take. What preparation do students need in terms of language input and thinking time? If one student is speaking, what are the others doing? Plan a task for everyone as this will make the pace faster and motivation higher.

Ideas for synchronous speaking activities

These activities can be done live, using many different online platforms. Students take turns to practise speaking and listening to their peers.

- **Story starters:** Teacher starts a story with a word that suggests how the story can continue, for example 'Fortunately ...', 'Unfortunately ...' or 'Suddenly ...'. Nominate a learner to continue the sentence. This learner nominates the next person to continue.
- **Speak for a minute:** Choose topics and put them on the board. Learners choose a topic to talk about. Give some preparation time. Learners take it in turns to talk for a minute on that topic. Give the other learners a task, e.g. listen for specific words/phrases and make a note of them. Note: this needs to be something positive rather than looking for errors.
- **What's changed?:** Tell learners to observe each other for a moment or two. Tell learners you will turn off everyone's videos. They have to change one thing about themselves. Turn off videos for 30 seconds. Turn videos back on. Learners describe what has changed about each other. Repeat, but this time learners make two changes. Alternatively, turn your video off and change something about you or your surroundings.

- **Personalised descriptions:** Learners describe where they are, the view from outside, what they did yesterday, their dream house, their dream job, etc.
- **Puppets:** Get learners to bring a puppet or draw a face on each thumb. This creates a second person for each learner. Practise a dialogue as a whole class. Turn the audio off and learners practise their dialogues using their puppets or thumbs.
- **Debate 4 3 2 1:** Choose a debate topic. Divide the class into two halves and assign a position (for or against). Give groups four minutes to decide their points, using breakout rooms or chat (participants can usually send messages to specific people and not the whole group). Groups choose a spokesperson, who has three minutes to present their ideas, followed by the other side. While listening to the presenters, the others make notes for their response. They have three minutes to prepare and two minutes to respond. Finally: two minutes to prepare points and a one-minute final summary.
- **Polls:** Create a poll of a few questions (e.g. a list of options of what learners had for breakfast/ hobbies/what they did yesterday). Learners answer the questions. Display the results for learners to describe. Turn the audio off while learners practise their sentences on their own. Nominate learners to say their sentences.

Ideas for asynchronous speaking activities

These activities are useful when practising speaking as a class, online or otherwise, isn't possible. Learners can do these activities at home with family or alone.

- **Describe my room:** Learners make a short video to describe their room using prepositions of place. This can be adapted to different situations such as describing their daily routine or what they did yesterday. Alternatively, this can be an audio recording to send to the teacher. Note: consent is needed if any other person is in the video, so make sure learners understand not to show anyone else in their video.
- **An interview:** Learners interview someone in their family and record the interview. The recording can then be used for listening practice with some comprehension questions.
- **Modelling:** Send a recording of yourself talking about a topic from the course. Send the transcript of the sentences you use. Learners listen and practise copying your intonation and stress patterns. They record themselves and compare it to the original.
- **A short radio drama:** Ask your learners to think of situations where there is a lot of drama and emotion – for example, a sinking ship, an animal needing help or a celebration. Ask the learners to write a short three-minute dialogue with at least four characters. They then record the dialogue doing different voices for each character and adding sound effects if possible. They write comprehension questions and share the recordings with the other students.

Useful links

- Using the coursebook and breakout rooms for activities – webinar and guidance: <https://bit.ly/BreakoutWebinar>
- Guidance on using criteria for assessment and giving feedback: <https://bit.ly/RTTAassessment1>
- British Council guidance on online safety for teachers and their learners: <https://tinyurl.com/yazgwqj7>