

DESIGNING TASKS TO ASSESS SPEAKING: BALANCING INTERACTION AND ACCURACY

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Annotation

The article "Designing Speaking Tasks: Balancing Interaction and Accuracy" explores essential principles for developing effective speaking tasks in language education. It discusses the need for authenticity, appropriate cognitive demand, and clear objectives when designing tasks that promote both fluency and linguistic accuracy. The article provides examples of effective task types, such as debates, role-plays, and information gap activities, which foster interactive language use while encouraging learners to focus on accuracy. Pedagogical implications highlight the importance of task selection, scaffolding, feedback, and technology integration, emphasizing strategies for teachers to enhance learners' speaking proficiency through well-balanced tasks.

Keywords: Speaking Tasks, task design, fluency and accuracy, task authenticity, language education, interaction, pedagogical implications, scaffolding, feedback, technology integration

The design of speaking tasks is fundamental in developing and assessing language learners' speaking proficiency. The aim is to create tasks that allow learners to practice authentic communication while maintaining linguistic accuracy. Balancing interaction and accuracy is essential, as it reflects real-life communication where speakers must engage naturally (interaction) while using language forms correctly (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) (Bygate, 2018; Luoma, 2004). This balance is crucial in preparing learners for real-world situations, helping them develop fluency and the ability to communicate both effectively and accurately (Ellis, 2003).

In speaking tasks, interaction refers to the dynamic exchange of language between individuals. It involves turn-taking, spontaneous responses, negotiating meaning, and engaging in natural communication. Interaction is a vital component of communicative competence, allowing learners to practice how to communicate effectively with others (Luoma, 2004).

Accuracy focuses on the correct use of language forms, including grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. In speaking tasks, accuracy involves producing language that is grammatically correct and contextually appropriate, ensuring the clarity and comprehensibility of the message (Bygate, 2018).

Speaking tasks have evolved significantly in language pedagogy. Traditionally, language assessments focused primarily on accuracy, emphasizing grammar drills or isolated sentence production. However, with the rise of communicative language teaching (CLT), the focus shifted towards promoting authentic communication and fluency (Fulcher, 2003). In CLT, tasks that encourage interaction, such as role-plays, discussions, and debates, became popular, as they offer opportunities for learners to use language in real-life scenarios (Ellis, 2003). However, this shift posed a challenge: while interactive tasks promote fluency, they may not necessarily ensure linguistic accuracy. As a result, balancing these two aspects became crucial in task design and assessment (Green, 2009).

Understanding Interaction and Accuracy in Speaking Tasks

Interaction is fundamental to language development and speaking proficiency. It involves engaging with others through verbal exchanges, including asking and answering questions, sharing opinions, negotiating meaning, and providing feedback. Interaction provides learners with opportunities to develop communicative competence, such as turn-taking skills, active listening, and appropriate responses, which are crucial in real-life communication (Luoma, 2004; Bygate, 2018). In order to enhance interaction, tasks should include scenarios that require collaboration, information exchange, or problem-solving. For instance, role-plays and group discussions are interactive tasks that simulate authentic communication (Ellis, 2003). Accuracy involves the grammatical correctness, appropriate vocabulary usage, and clear pronunciation of language production. It is a critical component of speaking proficiency, as it ensures that the message is not only fluent but also clear and comprehensible (Green, 2009). Speaking tasks need to encourage learners to focus on language forms while interacting. This may include using targeted prompts or tasks requiring specific linguistic structures. For example, information gap activities or tasks requiring explanation can prompt learners to use precise language (Fulcher,

2003). Although fluency and interaction are prioritized in many communicative tasks, accuracy must be integrated deliberately to ensure learners are practicing language forms accurately and appropriately (Bygate, 2018).

By understanding these components, educators and test developers can design tasks that incorporate both elements, providing a balanced approach to speaking practice and assessment. This balance allows learners to engage authentically in communication while focusing on producing accurate and meaningful language.

Principles for Designing Speaking Tasks

Designing effective speaking tasks requires a set of principles that balance interaction, accuracy, and task authenticity to facilitate language development and proficiency assessment. The following principles are essential for achieving this balance:

Task Authenticity: One of the most crucial principles is ensuring task authenticity. Tasks should closely mimic real-life communication scenarios to engage learners and provide meaningful practice opportunities (Luoma, 2004). Authentic tasks, such as role-plays, debates, and discussions, mirror real-world contexts and enable learners to apply their language skills naturally. The more realistic and relatable a task is, the more likely it will elicit genuine interaction and language use (Ellis, 2003).

Cognitive Demand and Complexity: Tasks must be designed with an appropriate level of cognitive complexity to challenge learners while still being achievable. Overly simplistic tasks may not push learners to engage deeply, while overly complex ones might hinder their ability to interact fluently or accurately. The cognitive load should be manageable, allowing learners to focus on both communication and accuracy without overwhelming them (Skehan, 1998). Gradually increasing task complexity over time, from simple question-and-answer exchanges to more complex problem-solving tasks, helps learners develop their skills progressively.

Clear Task Objectives and Structure: Clearly defined objectives and structure are fundamental in task design. Tasks should have specific goals that guide learners toward a particular outcome, such as reaching a decision, finding a solution, or

exchanging information. These objectives help learners stay focused and provide a framework within which they can use language purposefully (Fulcher, 2003). Additionally, clear instructions ensure that learners understand what is expected of them, allowing them to engage confidently in the task.

Balance Between Fluency and Accuracy: Achieving a balance between fluency (the ability to produce language smoothly) and accuracy (the correct use of language forms) is a central challenge in task design. Task prompts should be designed to encourage interaction while also guiding learners to pay attention to their language output. For instance, tasks requiring explanation or justification (e.g., describing a process or defending an opinion) may prompt learners to focus on linguistic precision and clarity, while also engaging in spontaneous communication (Green, 2009).

Incorporating Scaffolding Techniques: Scaffolding techniques, such as pre-task planning, providing key vocabulary, or offering visual aids, support learners in balancing interaction and accuracy. Pre-task planning allows learners to prepare their thoughts and organize their language, making them more confident in their interactions (Ellis, 2003). Additionally, providing learners with key phrases or sentence starters can guide them toward using accurate language forms during the task. Visual aids, such as diagrams or pictures, can also serve as helpful prompts to stimulate interaction.

Variety and Flexibility in Task Types: Using a variety of task types, such as debates, interviews, and group discussions, provides learners with diverse interaction opportunities and linguistic demands. Flexibility in task design allows teachers to adjust the tasks based on the learners' needs, proficiency levels, and contexts (Luoma, 2004). This adaptability ensures that tasks remain engaging and effective across different learning environments.

Examples of Effective Speaking Tasks

To effectively balance interaction and accuracy, speaking tasks must be carefully designed and implemented. Here are some examples of tasks that successfully incorporate the principles mentioned above:

Debates: Debates are a powerful speaking task that require learners to argue their points of view while responding to opposing arguments. This task promotes

interaction as learners must engage in turn-taking and react to others' contributions spontaneously. At the same time, debates require accuracy, as participants need to use appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and structures to present convincing arguments. Debates also involve higher cognitive demands, pushing learners to organize their thoughts and language carefully to communicate their ideas effectively (Bygate, 2018). The competitive and dynamic nature of debates enhances engagement and offers opportunities for authentic communication.

Information Gap Activities: These activities involve two learners or groups exchanging information that the other party does not have, requiring them to ask and answer questions to complete a task. Information gap tasks encourage both interaction and accuracy, as learners need to communicate clearly and accurately to convey and receive information. For example, one learner might have a map while the other has directions, and they must work together to find a location. This setup prompts learners to use precise language forms (e.g., prepositions, question forms) while engaging in a back-and-forth exchange, creating a balance between fluency and accuracy (Green, 2009).

Role-Plays: Role-plays are versatile speaking tasks where learners act out different scenarios, such as ordering food at a restaurant, handling a complaint, or discussing a travel plan. These tasks simulate real-life interactions, providing authentic opportunities for learners to practice spontaneous communication (Fulcher, 2003). Role-plays allow teachers to control the level of difficulty by specifying roles and the level of formality required, thereby ensuring that learners are pushed to use appropriate language forms. By setting a context where certain vocabulary or structures are needed, teachers can direct learners to focus on accuracy within a natural communicative exchange.

Problem-Solving Discussions: In these tasks, learners are presented with a problem (e.g., planning a party or designing a product) that they must solve collaboratively. Problem-solving discussions encourage extensive interaction as learners negotiate, suggest ideas, and make decisions together. This task type also fosters fluency, as learners must engage continuously with their peers to reach a consensus. At the same time, teachers can introduce conditions that require accuracy,

such as using specific vocabulary or expressing agreement/disagreement politely, ensuring that learners practice precise language while interacting dynamically (Ellis, 2003).

Interviews and Surveys: Interviews and surveys are effective speaking tasks that involve learners asking and answering questions on a specific topic. These tasks encourage learners to engage in structured interactions, promoting the use of question forms, appropriate responses, and follow-up questions (Luoma, 2004). For example, learners could conduct a survey about classmates' hobbies or preferences, requiring them to practice both asking and answering in a structured yet spontaneous manner. By providing learners with interview scripts or guiding questions beforehand, teachers can scaffold the task, helping learners focus on both fluency and accuracy during the exchange.

Storytelling and Retelling: Storytelling tasks involve learners narrating a story based on their experiences or a given prompt. Retelling, on the other hand, requires learners to listen to a story and then recount it in their own words. These tasks promote fluency as learners organize and convey their ideas in a coherent manner. Teachers can design storytelling tasks that focus on specific language forms (e.g., past tense, sequencing words) to encourage accuracy (Skehan, 1998). Visual aids, such as picture sequences or story maps, can further support learners by providing a scaffold to help them structure their stories accurately while maintaining interaction.

By implementing these effective speaking tasks, educators can create opportunities for learners to practice both interactive fluency and linguistic accuracy. These tasks, grounded in authentic communication scenarios, help bridge the gap between classroom practice and real-life language use, ensuring that learners develop well-rounded speaking skills.

Pedagogical Implications

Designing speaking tasks that balance interaction and accuracy has significant pedagogical implications for language teaching. These implications highlight how teachers can effectively implement speaking tasks to enhance learners' communicative competence and language proficiency.

Task Selection and Customization: Teachers need to be mindful when selecting and customizing tasks to suit their learners' proficiency levels, learning goals, and contexts. Tasks should be chosen based on their ability to provide opportunities for both interaction and accuracy. For instance, while beginner learners may benefit from simple information gap activities or structured role-plays, more advanced learners might engage in debates or problem-solving discussions to practice higher-order language skills. By customizing tasks to match learners' needs and abilities, teachers ensure that all students are challenged yet supported in their language development (Ellis, 2003).

Integrating Scaffolding Techniques: Scaffolding plays a crucial role in helping learners balance fluency and accuracy during speaking tasks. Teachers can implement scaffolding strategies such as pre-task planning, providing language models, or offering visual aids. For example, pre-task planning allows learners to organize their thoughts and rehearse language structures before engaging in the task, increasing their confidence and ability to communicate effectively (Ellis, 2003). Visual aids and key vocabulary lists support learners in focusing on both language use and interaction. As learners become more proficient, the level of scaffolding can be gradually reduced to promote greater independence.

Emphasizing Feedback and Reflection: Teachers should provide immediate and constructive feedback to learners during and after speaking tasks. Feedback should address both fluency and accuracy, highlighting learners' strengths and areas for improvement. Corrective feedback, such as recasting or clarification requests, can help learners notice and correct their errors while keeping the flow of interaction intact (Bygate, 2018). Additionally, incorporating reflective activities, such as self-assessment or peer feedback, allows learners to analyze their own performance, identify challenges, and set goals for future practice. This reflective approach helps learners become more aware of their progress and develop strategies for improvement.

Task Sequencing for Progressive Development: Sequencing tasks to gradually increase complexity is another essential pedagogical consideration. Teachers can design lessons where tasks evolve from simple, controlled activities to more open-

ended and complex ones. For instance, a lesson might start with a controlled role-play where learners practice a specific dialogue structure, followed by an information gap activity, and then conclude with an open discussion or debate. This progression enables learners to build fluency and accuracy step by step, gaining confidence with simpler tasks before tackling more demanding interactions (Skehan, 1998). It also ensures that learners have sufficient practice in using both language forms and interactive strategies.

Balancing Task Authenticity and Assessment: Authenticity in speaking tasks enhances learners' engagement and motivation; however, assessing such tasks can be challenging. Teachers must develop assessment criteria that accurately measure both interaction and accuracy while reflecting real-life communication. For example, teachers might create rubrics that evaluate fluency, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage, and interaction strategies (e.g., turn-taking, responding to questions) (Green, 2009). Such rubrics help teachers provide objective, transparent assessments while ensuring that the tasks remain as authentic as possible.

Promoting Collaborative Learning Environments: Collaborative tasks, such as group discussions, role-plays, or problem-solving activities, foster a learning environment where learners can practice speaking interactively and receive peer support. Group dynamics encourage learners to communicate with each other, negotiate meaning, and engage in authentic exchanges. By incorporating collaborative tasks, teachers create opportunities for learners to develop social interaction skills and build confidence in using the language (Fulcher, 2003). Teachers can also encourage students to take on different roles within group tasks (e.g., a discussion leader or note-taker) to enhance engagement and provide varied language practice opportunities.

Incorporating Technology for Task Enhancement: Technology can play a supportive role in designing and implementing speaking tasks. Tools like online discussion platforms, language learning apps, and video recordings can facilitate interaction beyond the classroom and provide learners with authentic communication opportunities. For example, video-based tasks where learners record themselves completing a speaking task can allow them to review their performance, receive

feedback, and self-reflect on their progress (Bygate, 2018). Moreover, using virtual role-plays or online interviews can simulate real-life communication scenarios, increasing learner motivation and engagement. Technology also allows for the integration of multimedia elements, such as images or video clips, which can serve as prompts for speaking tasks and scaffold learners' language use.

Creating a Supportive and Error-Tolerant Classroom Atmosphere: Finally, it is important for teachers to foster a classroom environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. When learners know that errors are part of the learning process, they are more likely to engage actively in speaking tasks without fear of judgment. Teachers can promote an error-tolerant atmosphere by emphasizing the communicative purpose of tasks, rather than perfection, and by providing constructive and supportive feedback. Creating such an environment encourages learners to participate fully, experiment with language forms, and develop their interaction skills in a supportive setting (Skehan, 1998).

Conclusion

In summary, designing and implementing effective speaking tasks requires careful consideration of pedagogical principles. Teachers must create opportunities that balance interaction and accuracy while providing scaffolding, feedback, and a supportive classroom environment. By applying these pedagogical implications, educators can enhance their students' speaking proficiency, preparing them for authentic communication in real-world contexts.

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