

# **IMPROMPTU SPEAKING AS A TOOL TO IMPROVE NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS' FLUENCY IN ENGLISH**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Impromptu speaking can aid advanced ESL students in their confidence in formal speaking situations while improving their general ability to communicate on all levels. The impromptu speaking activity discussed here teaches the students to focus their speaking and listening skills as well as teaching them how to organise their ideas in a logical fashion. The reasons for teaching formal speaking procedures are discussed in addition to suggestions on how to organise an impromptu speaking lesson. Examples of topics and speech frameworks are given along with suggested preliminary exercises to help the student understand the mechanisms of an impromptu speech. A suggested critique sheet is also outlined and explained. This helps students organise both speech development and listening comprehension. In addition, some of the most common formal speaking difficulties are discussed and different solutions are suggested. Finally, the improvements expected from this speaking exercise are outlined.

Impromptu speaking is a much neglected tool to aid the advanced second language speaker in skills such as thought organisation and development. It improves the student's ability to communicate effectively on all levels and generates

poise and confidence. Such a speaking activity can also expand functional vocabulary and provide increasing opportunities for vocabulary use. Above all, impromptu speaking is a technique for improving command of spoken English and listening comprehension and, therefore its principal objectives are fluent and accurate speaking skills.

### WHAT IS IMPROMPTU SPEAKING?

Impromptu speaking is a relatively simple formal speaking exercise of a limited duration of time and with limited formal preparation.

### WHY TEACH A FORMAL SPEAKING TECHNIQUE?

While students create sequential statements effortlessly in their native language and even in English conversation, they often feel inhibited in speaking English in a formal circumstance. The aim of any of the formal speaking techniques such as extemporaneous speaking, oratory or debate, is not only to teach English communication but also to teach the students to develop their thoughts logically and to deliver these thoughts in a clear and concise way. Surprisingly enough, though students attempting this exercise are already advanced, for many it will be the first time they have actually given a "formal yet unprepared" speech in English. Such speaking exercises teach the student the difference between formal and conversational English. They encourage the development of an extensive and appropriate vocabulary and they develop culturally appropriate use of gesture and body language as well as teaching students to think and speak in an organised and logical manner.

### HOW TO ORGANISE AN IMPROMPTU SPEAKING LESSON

First, the teacher must explain what impromptu speaking is and then outline the speaking procedure, i.e. establish the

rules. The rules are briefly, as follows: a student is given the choice of two topics which have not been seen previously. The student has thirty seconds to choose a topic. Then, one, two or three minutes should be allowed for the thinking and writing that constitutes the preparation. The optimum preparation time is one minute (three minutes is for very slow students). The choice of time is at the teacher's discretion.

Impromptu is disarming in its seeming simplicity. It is difficult enough for a native speaker to give a unified and logically developed talk on a topic of consequence. Second language speakers therefore, need to be concise, methodical and prepared. Students should use the preparation time to make a sketchy, yet functional, outline of the speech they intend to deliver.

The objective then, is to train the students so they can select and organise a topic in the optimum 1.30 minutes (thirty seconds selection, one minute preparation) so they can then deliver a well organised, interesting speech for at least two minutes. It should be considered an equal problem (organisational or otherwise) if the student speaks either under or over time. Maintaining these rules is important if the overall objectives are to be reached.

The teacher will have to determine which organisational technique is best in selecting the topics. Since each student gets the choice of two topics they can either all have the choice of the same two topics and the remaining speakers wait outside the room or a number of topics can be put in a "hat" and each student selects two. This latter process is perhaps better in the initial stages since then all students participate in both the speaking and the listening comprehension exercises.

#### TIMEKEEPING

The timekeeper should have time cards which begin with 3 minutes and go backwards to  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute and STOP. The speaker can stop anytime after the 1 minute card is shown since he/she would then have spoken the required minimum of two minutes (3 minutes is the maximum limit).

Timing is important because it pressures the students to be precise, to keep to the point and to see the necessity of order in their speeches if they are to say everything they wish to say. Timing also gives the students a sense of logical order and as they become better able to deliver speeches it provides them with a system to measure their own progress.

#### EXAMPLES OF TYPES OF IMPROMPTU SPEAKING TOPICS

Impromptu speaking has a number of types of topics which can be used sequentially or together:

1. The "simple" one word topic; e.g. Money, Racism, Euthenasia
2. The fill in the blank conditional; e.g.

If I were a millionaire I would \_\_\_\_\_ . or  
If I could change the world I would \_\_\_\_\_ .

3. The straight-forward fill in the blank; e.g.  
The biggest problem in the world today is \_\_\_\_\_. or  
The greatest evil in society is \_\_\_\_\_.
4. Sayings and quotations; these are perhaps the most difficult topics to deal with and for that reason should be left until the class is familiar with the speaking technique and the timing confines; e.g.

"A penny saved is a penny earned" or  
"The pen is mightier than the sword".

The teacher may find it necessary to define some terms (and the smart student may well use the definition in his/her speech). It is, however, important that the teacher carefully select the topics because these speaking skills are best developed through a range of topics which are of universal interest and concern.

**SUGGESTED IMPROMPTU SPEAKING SPEECH  
FORMATS AND EXAMPLES**

Certain speeches lend themselves to a chronological/sequential development. This is particularly true of the one word topics. If the student is familiar with history or geography he/she can use this overall system to give the speech structure. For example with the topic "money" a student might choose to discuss money through the ages progressing from barter to the cheques of today and the international money situation or sequentially, the student may choose to discuss the types of money forms in different countries or a combination of both.

A second speech format which the student can learn to adapt quickly and effectively to impromptu speaking is the compare/contrast method. This technique presents both sides to a question and is best used if the student feels that by discussing only one aspect of a question he/she will still be under time. Even though the speaking minimum is only two minutes, thinking of a number of logically connected supporting facts can be difficult. If the student can be trained to focus on the acquisition of ideas this will be helpful in all other aspects of his/her English. For example: "Money"

<p><b>Good</b> life style business travel</p>	<p><b>Bad</b> takes the challenge away can't guarantee success doesn't buy health/friends</p>
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If the subject area is broad, dividing the topic will help and this gives a clearer framework for idea organisation.

The third method is the expository type of speech format. The main idea might be expressed as a general statement and then specific, concrete details clarify and develop the ideas. Details may be organised in the form of facts of all types, examples or reasons. For an example see (fig. 1) which uses the expository format while demonstrating how to organise the preparation card.

## PREPARATORY EXERCISES

All of the above may sound a little overwhelming at first. There are, however, a number of exercises that can be introduced before the teacher actually launches the students into the speaking exercise itself. Such exercises help students organise their thoughts and provide "source" material for immediate recall. One exercise that has proved successful is to train the students to draw on their own life/work experience. All fields of student activity can be explored from mathematics to economics and translated titles of native language texts. Moreover, since examples are often difficult to produce when students only have a minute or so for preparation it's necessary that they develop techniques which enable them to produce supporting details with minimum time.

Such an exercise, entitled "speed thinking", was developed to aid the above recall process. Put three major subject headings on the board; for example, films, books, music and then in seven (?) minutes have the students list as many titles under each heading as they can. Exercise two is another 5-7 minute exercise that follows immediately. Have the students list as many associated ideas as they can for the individual titles. For example, with the title *Hamlet* students might write: madness, love, circumstance etc. Follow this exercise by having individual students read out their lists. This provides other students with additional ideas. Repeat these exercises over a number of days and include some of the same topics each time. Exercise three is integrated into the above and is used to expand the student's active vocabulary. Once the most commonly developed categories (i.e. student preference) have been determined e.g. economics, science, literature, the teacher should prepare vocabulary lists in the related areas in addition to eliciting vocabulary from the students. It is amazing how advanced some students are in areas in which they are interested. Moreover since the areas where vocabulary lists have been developed stem from subject areas of student interest new words will be learned quickly. This vocabulary will be acquired both through the speaking and listening comprehension exercises that follow.

### HOW TO ORGANISE AN IMPROMPTU SPEECH

Introduction: The students must understand the necessity of an outstanding introduction. The aim of the introduction is to arouse interest and to convince an audience that the speech is worth listening to. If an audience is lost in the introduction it is never regained. A number of alternatives the student might choose in developing a strong introduction are:

- (a) State speaker intention e.g. "I wish to explain exactly why the *pollution* (topic) situation in this city is intolerable!"
- (b) Ask a rhetorical question which sets the theme by implication e.g. "I ask you, is the *pollution* situation in this city sufferable?"
- (c) Outline the theme or problem in point form.

These are just a few suggestions; there are many ways the students can open their speech topics. Other methods include stories, quotations, personal experiences, a definition of terms or even a rewording and emphatic delivery of the topic sentence (question). Whichever method the student chooses, the theme must be clearly stated and the topic clearly outlined.

#### *Body*

Once the student understands the necessity of capturing the audience's attention at the outset he/she must then have enough material on the preparation card (see fig. 1) to carry him/her through the speech. Using the journalistic technique of answering the how, when, where, why questions is an invaluable asset to aid student idea organisation and development. In this way points can be logically linked, one to another, in support of the student's overall premise. So, for example, if the topic is 'money' the student could first draw on the "speed thinking" exercises and could refer to Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" or the last class English reader or a recent newspaper article on inflation (the source doesn't have to be an English language newspaper) or an economic text. If this exercise fails then the

student can use the journalistic approach. All such ideas provide "meat" (evidence) to support the premise and to develop the body of the speech.

### *Conclusion*

This part of the speech is naturally very important and there are a number of ways to teach the students how to handle it. As with the other sections these recommendations are far from complete and are only suggested as a guide to the introduction of formal speaking as a valid and worthwhile activity for the ESL classroom.

If time is pressing, a simple and effective method is to restate the original premise of the introduction. A second method is to restate each major point made through the body of the speech (see fig. 1) drawing to a concluding statement. A third method is to end with a quotation or reference. This does not have to be exact or very complex; for example, if the topic were "freedom" a student might recall the reader (novel) *Call of the Wild* by Jack London and say "In concluding I'd like to refer to Jack London's famous book, *Call of the Wild*, which emphasises my point that freedom and life are synonymous." The student may equally prefer to end with another story, statistic or fact. Once a student has made a conclusion he/she should pause a moment to say thank you and then sit down.

### *The Critique Sheet* (fig. 2)

This sheet is an invaluable tool to measure both speaking confidence and listening comprehension. The categories listed are only suggestions and teachers may wish to delete some and add others. The items listed are provided to determine the critiquer's overall reaction to the speech. The major learning importance of the critique sheet is the notetaking section at the bottom. This provides both feedback to the speaker on how well his delivery was organised and a check on how well the listener understood the delivery. The score marking also indicates just how impressed with each category the listener was and emphasises the areas in which the speaker needs to improve most.

The teacher should provide each student with a critique sheet for each of the speakers. The categories and use of the sheet must be explained in detail. This is best achieved if the critique categories are related to the speech preparation outline (refer fig. 1) previously taught. The aim is to teach speakers to give a logically developed speech and to have notetakers be able to comprehend the speech and take down the essential points on paper. The critique sheet can help students do this if the speech is clear and logical and the ideas are separated by previously taught "clue" transition words (for example, following, then, in addition etc.). These sheets also provide the listener with a source of material from which to ask information questions at the end of the speech. The teacher should collect these sheets and note how much each student understood of what was said. It is important that the speaker get the critique sheets as soon as possible. By comparing them with his/her own preparation outline he/she can determine how well the speech was delivered. The teacher should always use the time immediately after each speech for constructive criticism and discussion. Peer support can be utilised as an effective aid in evaluating and analysing speaking content, style and manner. As a follow-up exercise the teacher can ask each student to write an outline of one of the four or five speeches they heard. Students should base this exercise on one of their critique sheets. In this way the teacher can use writing to consolidate the oral-aural work.

#### SPEAKING PROBLEMS AND SOME SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Generally the first hurdle is the student response "I can't" or "I don't know where to begin". In this situation coaxing and exploiting the use of the "wh" questions to structure a speech can help.

If a student suffers from "stage fright" there are a number of ways to assist. Never let the student stand "alone" for a long period of time. When a student feels that he/she cannot continue have him/her sit (but still at the front of the class).

Sitting immediately removes the formality of the situation. Utilise whatever information the student has already given to field questions to the class. Elicit further questions from the class to the speaker. Often in the more relaxed discussion format the speaker will contribute additional information. This process takes time but ultimately the student/speaker will overcome and speaking confidence will increase.

Another method to relieve student tension is to draw attention away from content and organisation to the equally important, yet less difficult to master, stance and body language. Humour is often a valuable asset here. Point out crossed legs/arms, chewing gum, the awkwardness of arms/hands etc., while helping the students feel they are working well with the other aspects of speaking.

In impromptu speaking, in particular, speakers will often draw a "blank" with relatively simple vocabulary and grammar points. The problem is not the blank, because the student knows the word very well "it is on the tip of my tongue" they say, the problem is convincing the student to go around the "exact" word. One of the great assets of impromptu speaking is that speakers learn to adapt to that awkward, but frequent, moment when the non-native speaker can't find the "right" word.

Another common speaking problem is the "bullet speaker". Some students feel that the faster they talk the faster they'll finish and naturally they are right! It is wise to let the first such talk be completed in this manner but thereafter it is better to interrupt. The student will invariably be under time and will learn in the discussion period that follows that his/her peers understood little or nothing of the speech. Often the student is simply not aware how fast he/she is speaking and a tactful interruption will result in a more focused delivery.

It is important to be aware that many speakers will be totally unaware of particular habits they have when speaking; e.g. leaning on the front table, tapping the pencil they forgot to put down, umms and ahs or speaking too quickly. Most of these problems can be handled by pointing them out when they occur or soon after. Students will soon become aware of their own idiosyncracies.

### WAYS TO INCREASE STUDENT INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION

Always ask the most confident students to give the first set of speeches. Others will see that the task is less formidable than they had thought and they will be more prepared to accept the assignment when it is their turn.

Emphasise the students' conversational ability. After all, the major aspects of conversation dynamics is the building of one statement on another. Formal speaking is being able to build such sentences quickly and confidently in an organised and developed manner. Emphasize the fact that well chosen impromptu topics have relevance to the students and to contemporary life. This heightens student-interest, expands their horizons and most importantly enables them to express cogent, personal opinions which are supported by facts.

### EXPECTED RESULTS

1. Students will acquire the ability to organise and confidently deliver thoughts in English.
2. Students develop the ability to distinguish between main and supporting ideas, to detect implications, interpret facts and reach conclusions.
3. Impromptu speaking provides skills that go beyond merely speaking with accuracy. These skills include an extensive and appropriate vocabulary which develops as the speaker grows more confident.
4. Students will learn to determine relevant information and to recall facts when necessary. They will also develop a sense of the need for organisation.
5. Impromptu speaking develops the appropriate use of facial gesture and body language as well as developing other non-technical language aspects such as cross-culture awareness and socio-linguistically appropriate usage.
6. Writing should improve in organisation while at the same time writing reinforces and expands the patterns acquired in speaking and listening.

## FIGURE 1

IMPROMPTU  
A Sample Preparation Card

This is a suggested outline only. It is much larger than one that students would normally have time to prepare. Any one of the A, B, or C divisions would normally be enough to provide a good speech. Where, when, who, why, etc are idea developers only and are by no means compulsory.

The left hand column indicates divisions a student might use. The choice of "wh" words has been arbitrary. The right hand column is an approximation of what a student's outline might look like.

Topic: "money"

Premise: not good

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*Introduction :*

Where, when, why  
questions etc.

Quote: The Bible says money is the root of all evil

where: Government, Business, Personal

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*Body :*

Where . . . . .

*A. Government*                    1. increase tax  
*result:* less money for poor, education, arts

example . . . . .

*Example:* Regan/Thatcher/EEC

how . . . . .

2. Increase spending on defense  
*result:* wars

example . . . . .

*Example:* Middle East/Africa

who . . . . .

*B. Business*  
Multinational industries exploit  
*Example:* ITT/Chile, BP South Africa

example . . . . .

2. Money leads to greed in business  
*Example:* T.V. show Dallas and J.R.

examples . . . . .

*C. Personal*  
1. Story – mother's purse  
2. Story – results in change in personality

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*Conclusions:*

Therefore Because of A, B, and C money  
is . . .

OR

Because of the previously mentioned points  
I would like to recall the opening quote and  
state emphatically that "money is . . . . ."

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N.B. Students will normally abbreviate.

**FIGURE 2**

**IMPROMPTU CRITIQUE SHEET**

Speakers Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Critiquers Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Indicate a value for each category using the following scale:  
 + for above average, 0 for average, and - for needs improvement.

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	<i>Score</i>
1. Adequate introduction which catches attention and arouses interest	_____
2. Clarity in Expression of Thought:	
a. Adequate statement of problem or idea	_____
b. Effective elaboration of the idea	_____
3. Effectiveness in Speech Construction:	
Continuity of thought through unity, coherence, clearness, force, and attractiveness	_____
4. Delivery:	
a. Poise, physical gesture	_____
b. Force, fluency, enunciation, and projection	_____

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Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes:

Introduction:

Body:

Conclusion:

