

# Fostering Students to State Opinions Comfortably Through a Speaking Activity

意見を発信する力を養成する  
スピーキングアクティビティ

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article, a speaking activity which can be implemented in university-level English courses will be introduced. With three integral components (familiar topics, feedback and student-self assessment), this activity has especially been designed and is effective for low-intermediate university students to state their opinions comfortably, to build up their vocabulary and increase their confidence in language learning. After being assigned the activity, students became more confident and responsive in conveying their ideas in English.*

**KEYWORDS:** Speaking, Confidence, Self-assessment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, I will introduce a speaking activity which can be easily implemented in low-intermediate level English courses. This activity benefits students by building vocabulary, providing an opportunity to express opinions comfortably, and fostering their confidence in language learning. The reason for creating this activity was that I noticed that discussion questions often accompanied by a particular reading passage were quite challenging for low-intermediate students; the questions require learners to understand the content, evaluate ideas and information while reading, and state their opinions based on their reading comprehension. In order to address this situation, I implemented a speaking activity, which would lighten the burden on students by providing enough scaffolding and familiar topics to them, consequently enhancing their confidence to carry out a discussion in English. Student self-assessment was also provided to raise students' consciousness and responsibility towards their language learning. The outcomes of the activity and assessment were remarkable; students became confident in giving their opinions as well as independent language learners.

## 2. RATIONALE

The aim of the activity is to foster students to state their opinions comfortably, to build up their vocabulary, and to construct confidence to carry out a discussion in English. The basic framework for this speaking activity was taken from Komatsubara's (2013) free-talk activity, in which junior high school students acquire their communication strategies by talking about a given topic freely, resulting in an increase of positive attitudes to communicate in English. I modified his activity with greater emphasis on fostering students to form their opinions clearly, hence building confidence, so that it serves as a bridge activity for students to successfully complete discussions on academic topics from the textbooks.

Significant focus is placed on how to build students' confidence in speaking in English. It seems that their reluctant attitude during speaking activities is often attributed to their insecurities and lack of experience to actively speak up in English. In Williams and Andrade (2009)'s study of EFL learner's anxiety and its causes, they confirm that activities that incorporate familiar topics prevent them from feeling anxiety in language learning. By talking about topics that relate to their personal experience, they are able to reduce their anxiety and hopefully feel the sense of achievement as they form their opinions. Thus, topics used in this activity gradually shift away from one's own relevant experience to more abstract and opinion type questions as the semester progresses. Each topic is accompanied with the opinion questions or open-ended questions which elicit their opinions with convincing reasons (Appendix A). What I emphasize during the task is the uniqueness and diversity in student responses, so that they will not adhere to right or wrong answers and present their opinions without hesitation.

Another component of this activity is student self-assessment. It offers an effective means of objectively reflecting on their progress and attitudes towards studying English, which enhances students' confidence. Cunningham (2011) suggests that self-assessment plays a significant role in raising students' consciousness and improving their attitude in their language learning. Baleghizadeh and Masoun (2013) also confirm that providing self-assessment on a regular basis increases their level of capability. Therefore, at the beginning of the semester and at the end of each month, students evaluate their progress and confidence in their speaking skills, the skills they want to improve, and what is essential to achieve them, on the scale provided on the worksheet (Appendix C), to engage them in the process of learning and stimulate their initiative in improving their English. The questions regarding their attitude and improvement are assessed by rating themselves, so that they can easily reflect on their progress every four weeks.

### 3. PROCEDURE

The activity is designed to be carried out during each lesson's warm-up session throughout the semester. First, I list the topic and the questions on the whiteboard, distribute the worksheet (Appendix B) and allocate 5 minutes for students to talk freely based on the topic. During the talk, I encourage the students to write down new words, which they looked up in a dictionary, in the "New Words and Expressions" section on the worksheet, and write their partner's answers in the "Your Partner's Response" section on the worksheet to promote note-taking skills. While monitoring the students, I provide prompts or light assistance where necessary.

Feedback is an integral part of this activity; students can build vocabulary and expand their perspectives by sharing their opinions as a class. After the talk, I collect the worksheets and compile common errors, useful expressions and interesting or thought-provoking ideas from their worksheets to share them in class. In the following week's class, after returning the worksheet to each student, I go through the errors, expressions and ideas on the whiteboard. I encourage students to write down any new or unfamiliar words that were brought up by other students in the "New Words & Expressions" section on the worksheet, so that they are able to refer back to their vocabulary list during the semester for continual revision. As an extension, writing a journal, making a presentation and debating could possibly be incorporated as a follow-up activity if time permits.

Student self-assessment also plays an important role in the activity. At the end of each month, I instruct students to evaluate their progress and confidence in their speaking skills on the scale provided on the worksheet (Appendix C). For the questions regarding to their efforts to improve their weaknesses in English, I allow students to answer in Japanese to prevent their responses from being misinterpreted due to their English proficiency. Additionally, I ask students to write any comments to the instructor, or to suggest topics they want to discuss in future classes.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This activity benefited students in three ways; stating their opinions comfortably, building vocabulary, and fostering their confidence. The primary focus is to improve student's skills to state one's opinion comfortably. Over the semester, students became more confident in organizing and forming their opinions and took more responsive roles during class conversations. According to the results of the Self-Assessment collected from 37 students, while the number of the students who answered "very comfortable" and "comfortable" with stating their opinions was 3 at the beginning of the semester, it increased to 16 at the end of the semester. On the contrary, the number of students who perceived themselves as "uncomfortable" and "very uncomfortable" decreased from 15 to 7. Students were also given the means to be able to expand their perspectives by sharing their opinions as a class while being exposed to new ideas by

fellow students. This extended their range of expressions and thoughts which could be employed during their future discussions.

By implementing this speaking activity, I perceived positive outcomes in my classes. I believe that the activity developed students' potentials to discuss on academic themes comfortably and promote them to become more confident and independent language learners.

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## APPENDIX A

### Topics and Questions

#### Week 1

Topic: Traveling

Questions: Which countries do you want to go? Why do you want to go there?  
Do you think you would have a chance to go there in the future?

#### Week 2

Topic: University

Questions: Why did you decide to go to university? What do you want to learn while you are in university? Why do you want to learn it/them?

#### Week 3

Topic: Studying English

Questions: Why do we have to study English? What is your purpose of studying English?

#### Week 4

Topic: Theater

Questions: What is the best live theatrical performance you've ever seen? Why do you think it was the best performance?

#### Week 5

Topic: Smartphone

Questions: Do you always have your smartphone at your side? Why or why not?  
What are the side effects of smartphones?

#### Week 6

Topic: Giving advice

Questions: What are three pieces of advice you would give younger kids in junior high school? Why?

#### Week 7

Topic: Lifestyle

Questions: Which do you prefer, the city lifestyle or the country lifestyle?  
Support your answer with sufficient reasons.

#### Week 8

Topic: Amazing structure

Questions: What do you think is the most amazing structure in the world? Why?

Week 9

Topic: Inspiration

Questions: Who inspires you? What makes the person so special to you? How does he or she influence you?

Week 10

Topic: Money and Happiness

Questions: Can money buy you happiness? Why or why not? Support your answer.

Week 11

Topic: Invention 1

Questions: Think of a machine you would like to invent. Describe your idea.

Week 12

Topic: Invention 2

Questions: What do you think is the most important invention? How did it change our lives?

Week 13

Topic: Future

Questions: What do you want to do with your life? Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Why do you think so?

## APPENDIX B

Name:

	Topic & Your Partner's Response	New Words & Expressions
Week 1	Topic:	
Week 2	Topic:	
Week 3	Topic:	
Week 4	Topic:	
Week 5	Topic:	
Week 6	Topic:	
Week 7	Topic:	
Week 8	Topic:	
Week 9	Topic:	
Week 10	Topic:	
Week 11	Topic:	
Week 12	Topic:	
Week 13	Topic:	

# APPENDIX C

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

	Is it enjoyable to speak in English?  5=Very enjoyable 4=Enjoyable 3=Moderately enjoyable 2=Not so enjoyable 1=Not at all	How comfortable are you with stating your opinion in English?  5=Very comfortable 4=Comfortable 3=Moderately comfortable 2=Not so comfortable 1=Not at all	How confident are you to speak in English?  5=Very confident 4=Confident 3=Moderately confident 2=Not so confident 1=Not at all	What skills(s) do you want to improve in the next four weeks? (You can also write your response in Japanese.)	What are you going to do to improve the skills(s)? (You can also write your response in Japanese.)
The beginning of the semester	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1		
October	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1		
November	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1		
December	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1		
The end of the semester	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1		

Write any comments or suggestions to the instructor.

Note: \*This appendix was originally printed in landscape orientation.