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## **FOSTERING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR IT AND DATA SCIENCE STUDENTS**

*Communication has always been a challenging issue for ESL students, as the language is an ever-changing phenomenon, and continually undergoes transformations due to both linguistic and extralinguistic factors. To master the language means not only having a good knowledge of grammatical rules, syntax, and word stock, but also possessing the ability to put that knowledge into practice, i.e., communicating. Nowadays, due to technological advancement, learners get a chance to use AI both as a means of acquiring a plethora of information and as a companion to communicate with, like a native speaker. The article reflects the barriers that language learners face while speaking in the higher educational sector, and suggests some ways to overcome these difficulties, particularly while learning Business English.*

*The objective of the work is to identify the challenges that the students encounter while speaking English, especially in the professional sphere, and work out some techniques and strategies to facilitate the speaking process. Developing advanced*

*speaking skills also meets the need for better results in the speaking section of international examinations, such as TOEFL or IELTS, that the students take to participate in exchange programs. We have observed the students' language proficiency at the Department of Information Technologies and Data Science at the Armenian State University of Economics. Implementing communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning (TBL) techniques, using the method of shadowing, encouraging the students to speak without being interrupted and corrected, led to higher motivation for getting involved in the speaking process, which resulted in significantly better performance reflected in text retelling, discussions, and presentations.*

**Keywords:** *speaking skills, communicative-language teaching, task-based learning, shadowing technique, oral presentation*

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**INTRODUCTION.** The primary function of language learning is communication, which implies expressing your thoughts in the target language orally or in a written form, and understanding the language-carriers or foreign speakers while interacting. In the academic environment, teaching speaking skills is more challenging, as the students should not only improve their General English proficiency but also combine their background knowledge with professional vocabulary. The study addresses the following questions.

1. What barriers can be identified that hinder the development and improvement of the students' speaking skills in the classroom setting?
2. How can the teacher facilitate oral communication during the lesson?
3. What techniques and strategies should be implemented to enhance speaking skills as a language proficiency?

While designing activities in order to improve speaking skills in Business English and business communication, we have taken into account the learners' English language proficiency. To assess the English language proficiency, 40 students at the Department of Information Technologies and Data Science were given a diagnostic test, and as a result, they possessed A2 level (34% of the students) and B1 level (66% of the students). It should be mentioned that the textbook that students use for the Business English course, "English for Economists-2" by L. Harutyunyan, S. Chalabyan, A. Grigoryan, and K. Torgomyan, includes warming-up activities and a small presentation for each lesson to enhance speaking skills. Sometimes the students get ready for these activities at home, and we find that extra assignments are needed to improve the students' pronunciation and communication skills in class, as they should also learn how to communicate spontaneously in an academic environment. Besides, many students take international exams to continue their education or to participate in internship/exchange programs, and struggle with the speaking section. To facilitate the speaking process, we have introduced some elements borrowed from the speaking section of the TOEFL exam.

First, we have organized the lessons by implementing activities suggested by the TESOL Methodology Spring 2025 training course. These activities are categorized as visual-spatial, interpersonal, and logical-mathematical. Visual-spatial activities, including charts depicting and word puzzles, are used to activate background knowledge on the topic. In the second stage, which implies interpersonal activities, we have implemented role play in order to improve socio-emotional strategies. The final stage represents logical-mathematical exercises, and the best example of such activities proved to be graph analyses, as the students represented a topic-related graph and got a chance to use relevant professional vocabulary. Later, the students included graph analyses in their individual oral presentations. These exercises have enhanced their meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies for specific tasks or assignments.

Furthermore, in order to help the students improve pronunciation and acquire an authentic accent, we have introduced the method of shadowing suggested by American linguist Alexander Arguelles, which has later been described as a highly beneficial technique for improving pronunciation, fluency, and listening comprehension (Duong & Nguyen, 2025). This method is a mixture of listening and speaking activities, and the idea is to repeat the words and sentences of native speakers within 150 milliseconds of hearing them. This method helps to refine pronunciation, intonation, and possess a native-like accent. Therefore, cultivating progressive speaking skills is closely related to active listening as well.

**LITERATURE REVIEW.** There are several approaches to developing oral communication competence. Scott Thornbury emphasizes that speaking is a skill requiring a knowledge base that can be categorized as knowledge of language features (linguistic knowledge) and knowledge independent of language (extra-linguistic knowledge), including cultural context, social norms, etc. (Thornbury, 2005, pp. 11-12) This approach explains the speaking process as a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, and as communication is among different people, you cannot always anticipate what question you may be asked, or how the flow of communication will change within a conversation. Possessing progressive speaking skills, such as handling objections, clarifying, or summarizing, is essential as real-world communication always takes place on the spot, and sometimes poor skills may lead to misunderstanding and failure. Speaking is a form of oral communication, and overall, it is an exchange of spoken words. Jeremy Harmer emphasizes the elements of speaking, pointing out that the students who are eager to speak fluently in English need to be able to enhance their pronunciation, use appropriate stress, intonation, and speak in connected speech (Harmer, 2007, p. 343). When it comes to communicating in a foreign language, proper pronunciation is a must; otherwise, it may result in misinterpretation. English pronunciation is the main problem for Armenian ESL learners, and it is challenging for them since pronunciation rules differ dramatically in English and in Armenian.

The role of the teacher is highly important while teaching speaking skills, and as Marianne Celce - Murcia states, before starting the teaching/learning process, the teacher should set forth the following questions: “Who are the students?” “What do they expect to learn?” “What am I expected to teach?” (Murcia, 2001, p. 104).

Another basic consideration is the level of the students and their perceived needs. The level of the students’ knowledge proficiency can be checked through a diagnostic test given by the professor. Speaking skills are far more important for academic learners as they should be prepared for not only everyday communication with General English but also for different sorts of activities such as discussions on academic topics, interacting with peers, and professors. For instance, during the teaching/learning process, academic students learn to plan and conduct business meetings, give speeches about the business sphere, make oral presentations, participate in discussions, and actively interact with their peers. Before teaching Business English, teachers should ask themselves whether the topic is appropriate for the level of the students, whether the active vocabulary is topical, relevant to the text, and practical for real-world communication. Cristine Goh and Anna Burns propose a holistic approach to teaching speaking. This approach addresses L2 learners’ cognitive, emotional, and social needs as they work on acquiring good speaking skills. This idea is based on a socio-cognitive perspective of language learning, which means that learning is not just a cognitive but also a social process. Three key factors are taken into account while teaching English: teachers, materials, and learners (Goh and Burns, 2012).

Besides, according to Penny Ur (1996), four main extra-linguistic factors make speaking hard for learners: inhibition, lack of enthusiasm, mother-tongue use, and low participation. There are different approaches used to overcome these difficulties, among which it is noteworthy to emphasize approaches such as communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching to foster L2 students’ speaking and communicative skills.

CLT is an approach to language teaching where meaningful interaction is not only the goal, but also the means of instruction. According to Richards, people learn best when using the target language to do things rather than through studying how language works and practicing rules (Richards, 2006, p. 2). Learners are engaged in interactive language practice and use English in authentic ways in their classroom to help them acquire language skills. In this approach, we pay attention to meaning and comprehension, and support learners’ independent use of English by engaging them in interactive activities to help them develop communicative competence. This approach is a cornerstone for teaching Business English.

While implementing CLT, we design our English courses to include the following PPP (Presentation, Practice, and Production) sequence of activities. Specialists apply this approach to engage students in discussions, debates, presentation and role plays using appropriate vocabulary on the topic. Task-based

language teaching, which is also known as task-based instruction (TBI), plays a great role in teaching speaking (Willis, 2016). The goal is for students to use authentic language to complete a meaningful task. Tasks might include retrieving or giving information, solving a problem, or sharing ideas or feelings. Tasks might also take the form of ongoing projects (project-based learning). For instance, Business students who study Statistics as a subject are assigned to conduct research on statistical data about the specific topic, make a graph that reflects their research, and represent it orally. The L2 students have an opportunity to speak out, express themselves in the target language, and give a confident speech in front of the audience. After representing, the next level is the interaction between the presenter and the audience. Other students who are considered to be in the audience should address questions to the speaker. These activities trigger students' active participation in the lesson and activate critical thinking. Learners must engage in meaningful communication to fill in gaps and language knowledge through the use of learning activities or tasks, for example, using oral communication to discover what they don't know. It is vital to take responsibility for filling these knowledge gaps collectively and individually, as it facilitates smooth communication and result-driven learning.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY.** In order to achieve the goals that we set forth to improve ESL learners' speaking skills while teaching Business English, our research employs a combination of descriptive, qualitative, quantitative, comparative, and analytical methods as the fundamental aspects of the given study.

- The descriptive method has been used to measure the level of speaking skills among the second-year students at the Department of Information Technologies and Data Science.
- With the help of the qualitative method, the study has been carried out to reveal the barriers that language learners face while learning Business English and to assess the effectiveness of the techniques and exercises used by the specialists while teaching speaking.
- The comparative method has been applied to draw parallels between diverse approaches to teaching speaking skills and speaking comprehension, to determine the most beneficial strategies suggested by different researchers that facilitate English communication while teaching Business English.
- The analytical method has been used to evaluate the peculiarities of the methods and strategies for teaching Business English, and the results of students' performance.

Finally, the quantitative method has been applied to perform mathematical computations and statistics, so as to visually represent the data achieved after conducting the experimental lessons.

**ANALYSIS AND RESULTS.** In order to check the speaking proficiency of the students, we have introduced a speaking activity. Our primary objective has been to assess the speaking skills of the students, particularly the usage of professional word stock, fluency, time management, and grammatical and syntactical accuracy. We have adapted a speaking strategy from TOEFL exam and after introducing the topic of the upcoming lesson, Unit VIII: “Fundamentals of Markets”, taken from the textbook “English for Economists - 2” by L. Harutyunyan, S. Chalabyan, A. Grigoryan, K. Torgomyan, the students were instructed to give the definition of market and speak about the topic in one minute (Harutyunyan et al., 2022, p. 89). Originally, the first TOEFL speaking assignment offers 15 seconds to prepare the answer and 45 seconds to record it. We have extended the allotted time for preparation to 30 seconds and the answer time to 1 minute. 40 students participated in this activity, and their answers were recorded. The average number of words spoken by the students has been from 35 to 50. While speaking, no student has been interrupted, and no mistake has been corrected. Instead, their monologues have been recorded and later played for their fellow students to check and find the mistakes together. After this activity, the students were introduced to the new lesson, and they were provided with the topical vocabulary. The students read the text orally, and after each paragraph, they tried to retell the paragraph using the new vocabulary and state the main idea. Paraphrasing exercises following the text proved to be very beneficial as they improved both the word stock and gave a chance to use different sentence structures and different grammatical rules. Speaking is a productive skill, but it is inseparable from the receptive reading and listening skills, and, as they go hand in hand, listening activities were also applied during the lesson, and the students were provided with a video about the types of markets. Active listening strategies and the shadowing method were implemented to improve pronunciation and to expand the word stock.

After reading, paraphrasing, and listening activities, the same assignment was completed by the students, and there was a significant difference in the number of words (70-85 words) spoken in a minute, grammatical accuracy, and pronunciation. The number of syntactical mistakes has also been reduced. As a result of paraphrasing exercises, there was considerable progress in avoiding grammatical mistakes as well. After mastering the topical vocabulary and improving pronunciation through active listening (shadowing) activities, the students were more motivated to participate in speaking activities. The materials for the shadowing assignment were taken from [the https://shadowing.tech/home](https://shadowing.tech/home) platform.

Below we represent the transcripts of two students’ answers to the question “What is a market?” without making any corrections.

Table 1

<p><i>The student's answer before introducing topical vocabulary.</i>  <i>Preparation time- 30 seconds.</i>  <i>Answer time- 1 minute</i></p>	<p><i>The student's answer after introducing topical vocabulary.</i>  <i>Preparation time- 30 seconds.</i>  <i>Answer time- 1 minute</i></p>
<p><b>Student 1</b>                      Market is a system or a place where buyers and sellers meet each other *exchange *with their goods and services [servais]. Market can be... like *physical place... like a shop or *online place like an online shop.</p>	<p>A market is a system where sellers and buyers interact to exchange products. Markets can be physical like a grocery shop and digital like a marketplace. Prices are determined by supply and demand. When demand increases, or supply decreases, the price *is rise, and when it is opposite, prices go down. Markets can be competitive, where many firms sell similar products. Seldom the firms... Markets may be like a monopoly which means that a single seller *are dominating.</p>
<p><b>Student 2</b>                      In economics market is a composition or *system... *institution and social relations... where... partners exchange goods and services. When demand is low, price is higher... when supply is low, price is *lower...</p>	<p>*Market is a place or system where buyers and sellers exchange goods, services, or *financial asset. There are four popular types of markets: perfect competition, oligopoly market, monopoly, and monopolistic competition. Markets are an important part of the economy. Markets can be physical and online. *Market has advantages and disadvantages. Competition and innovation are key *advantage of market economy, and the disadvantage is intense competition.</p>

The proportion of mistakes made by the students is reflected in the following Figure.

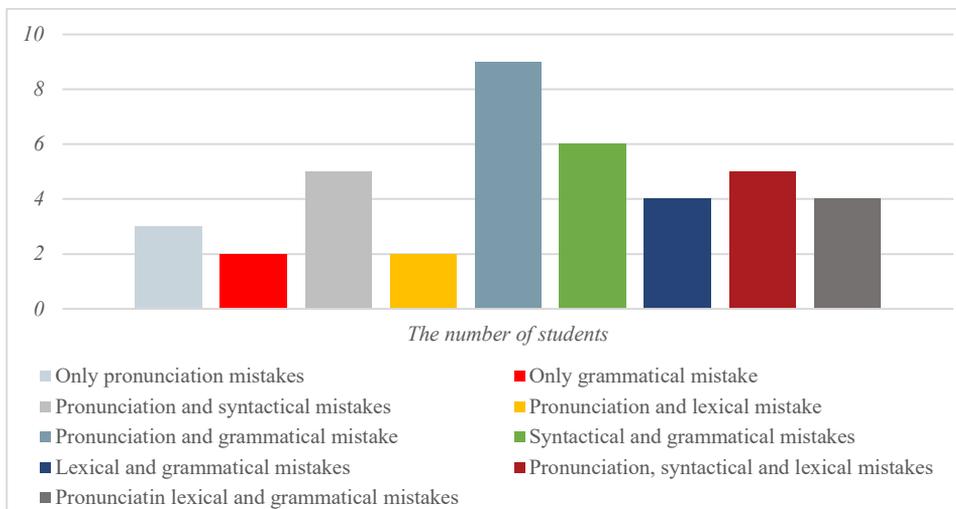


Figure 1. Types of mistakes made by the students

Table 1 and Figure 1 reflect that the students made grammatical, lexical, syntactical, and pronunciation mistakes. The students could make self-corrections, and they explained that the time limit (30 seconds) was an extra tension for them. Among grammatical mistakes, the misuse of articles and auxiliary verbs prevailed. Armenian ESL students tend to omit indefinite articles, as in the case of a market. The category of number of auxiliary verbs and verbs in general is wrongly used, as in the case of “a market \*have”. Some students had problems with verb tenses as well. Syntactical mistakes were mostly the result of the source language influence, as word order is not fixed in Armenian; some students broke the rules of English fixed word order (subject + predicate), and as for pronunciation mistakes, there were a lot of mispronunciations like service [servais]\*, and for some students, the word stress was also challenging. We can mention that the pronunciation mistakes were the easiest ones to be corrected; it took a longer time to improve grammatical and syntactical knowledge and to put it into practice.

Advanced speaking skills are essential for students, both for everyday communication in General English and for professional communication. One of the most practical methods that we have come across while teaching English in the Department of Information Technologies and Data Science is the method of oral presentations. Conventionally, oral presentation has been used as an assessment tool for speaking skills while teaching Business English. We find it beneficial for upgrading both linguistic and extra-linguistic skills.

This method targets multiple problems of communication.

1. Individual oral presentation provides each student with a chance to be integrated into the lesson and to be given a chance to speak for 3-5 minutes.
2. Getting prepared in advance and speaking before a familiar audience, the students can overcome the fear of public speaking.
3. Oral presentations give the students a chance to choose a topic and do research on it; in this way, they can improve both linguistic skills (professional vocabulary) and gain new knowledge in their specialty.
4. Oral presentations provide an opportunity to observe pronunciation and intonation problems.

The students choose the topics of oral presentation themselves, conducting research on subject-related topics.

Using this website - <https://learnenglishteens.britishcouncil.org/exams/speaking-exams/oral-presentation>, they were provided with examples of oral presentations: they watched two presentations and tried to identify the better one.

After listening to the samples of oral presentation, in order to construct the speech logically, they were provided with transition words and expressions such as:

1. Opening phrases – I am going to talk about..., the main focus of this presentation is...

2. Words and expressions to put the ideas into correct order: first of all, firstly, first and foremost, secondly, moreover, furthermore, in addition, next, finally, last but not least, to sum up, in conclusion.

To assess oral presentation properly, we have further developed a rubric based on the assessment criteria suggested by the Chair of Languages of the Armenian State Economic University of Economics, by adding some guidelines to assess the total score of the presentations made. We have identified the following components of assessment: material relevance (2,5 points), professional vocabulary (1,5 points), pronunciation (2 points), non-verbal communication skills (0,5 points), presentation engagement (1 point), and time management (0,5 points). The maximum points that the students may receive is 8 points, and due to the assessment component's importance, we have distributed those 8 points among them.

Table 2

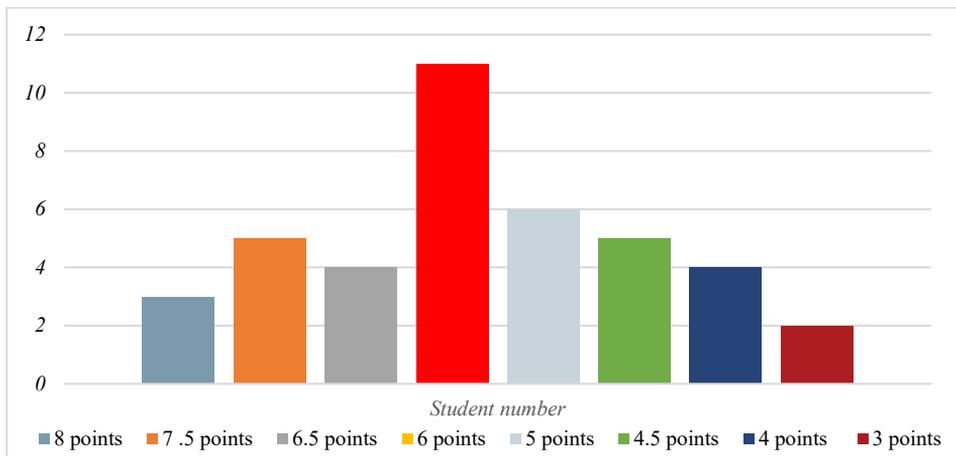
*A rubric for oral presentation assessment*

	<i>Excellent</i>	<i>Good</i>	<i>Fair</i>	<i>poor</i>
<b>Material relevance</b>	<p><i>Maximum points - 2,5</i></p> <p>The subject matter is clearly presented. The presentation supports the main idea, the speaker addresses the objective, and the questions related to the topic. The presenter contributes useful information, and there are no digressions from the topic.</p>	<p><i>Maximum points - 2</i></p> <p>The topic of the presentation and the objectives are well presented. The presentation touches upon the main ideas. Some details that make up the whole picture of the topic are missing, however, they don't directly affect the understanding of the subject material.</p>	<p><i>Maximum points - 1,5</i></p> <p>The topic of the presentation is stated, but the objectives are not clear. The presentation is general; there is some unnecessarily used information that deviates from the main subjects.</p>	<p><i>Maximum points - 0,5/0,3</i></p> <p>The presentation material doesn't fully reflect the subject matter, and it is explained vaguely. There are many digressions from the main idea.</p>
<b>Professional vocabulary</b>	<p><i>Maximum point - 1,5</i></p> <p>The presentation is rich in new words and expressions from professional vocabulary. These words are accurately and precisely used in the context.</p>	<p><i>Maximum point - 1,2</i></p> <p>There aren't many new professional words and expressions in the speech that are properly used in the context.</p>	<p><i>Maximum point - 0,9</i></p> <p>There are some new topical words and expressions; moreover, sometimes the words are not used in context.</p>	<p><i>Maximum point - 0,6/0,4</i></p> <p>The number of new topical words and expressions is limited, and they are mostly misused in context, which often leads to confusion.</p>

<b>Pronunciation</b>	<i>Maximum point - 2</i> There are no pronunciation mistakes. Intonation is relevant; there are no long pauses. The pace of the speech is balanced and appropriate.	<i>Maximum point - 1,5</i> Some pronunciation mistakes do not change the meaning of the word. There are short, unnecessary pauses; the speech is a little monotonous.	<i>Maximum point - 1</i> The number of pronunciation mistakes is noticeable and sometimes leads to misunderstanding. There are frequent pauses while speaking. The speaker sounds tedious but understandable.	<i>Maximum point - 0,5/0,3</i> There are a lot of pronunciation mistakes. The frequent pauses disrupt the natural flow of the speech.
<b>Non-verbal communication skills</b>	<i>Maximum points - 0,5</i> The speaker keeps eye contact with the audience, the facial expression and gestures are not tense, and the posture is straight and relaxed.	<i>Maximum point - 0,4</i> The speaker sometimes keeps eye contact with the audience, speaks relatively freely, and the speech is accompanied by relevant gestures.	<i>Maximum point - 0,3</i> The speaker hardly ever keeps eye contact, he/she is not confident enough, and don't use any gestures while explaining the material, and stands at the same place.	<i>Maximum point - 0,2/0,1</i> The speaker avoids eye contact with the audience. The gestures and face expression give away nervousness and lack of confidence.
<b>Presentation engagement</b>	<i>Maximum point - 1</i> The speaker delivers the presentation with a slide show, interestingly enough, to attract the attention of the audience. The presentation is also accompanied by interactive games (AI is allowed to be used), and the presenter asks both rhetorical and open-ended questions, making the listeners think and express their opinions.	<i>Maximum point - 0,8</i> The student gives an interesting presentation, in accordance with the slide show, the intonation is not monotonous. At the end of the presentation, he/she offers a short quiz for the fellow students to see whether they could get and retain the new information. However, the process of the presentation has not been accompanied by interactive activities, and there has been no	<i>Maximum point - 0,6</i> The presentation is delivered with some difficulties, the speaker represents only the limited material that he has prepared, and he/she is not able to provide complete answers to all the listeners' questions.	<i>Maximum point - 0,4/0,2</i> The speaker finds it hard to make the presentation engaging, he/she tries to read the information from the screen (slides). He/she is not confident enough to encourage further discussion on the topic and can't provide full answers to the students' questions. Maximum point 0,4

		feedback from the audience till the end of the presentation.		
<b>Time management</b>	<i>Maximum point - 0,5</i> The speaker fits in time and finishes the presentation in 5-7 minutes. The presentation is accompanied with slide show, and all the slides (10 slides) are thoroughly touched upon.	<i>Maximum point - 0,4</i> The speaker is not able to finish the presentation within the time limit; however, the student presents the main idea, missing some details.	<i>Maximum point - 0,3</i> The speaker hardly manages to deliver the presentation on time. He/she doesn't manage to speak about all the slides and misses the conclusion.	<i>Maximum point - 0,2/0.1</i> The speaker finds it hard to represent the whole presentation in time. He/she can hardly represent 4 or 5 slides.

After getting acquainted with the peculiarities of oral presentation, mastering its structure and specific word stock, the students represented individual oral presentations, including descriptive and inferential statistical analyses. The students were graded based on our rubric for oral presentation assessment. As a result, the students' scores are reflected on the graph.



**Figure 2. Rubric-Based Assessment of Students' Oral Presentations**

Two groups of students (40 students) have completed the assignment of oral presentation, which is a part of the formative assessment. We can state that 27.5 % of students got six points out of eight, which is a good base to achieve a satisfactory mark at the end of the term. Three students got the highest point and this is closely related to their language base and background knowledge of English. The students who received the lowest points had not been actively involved in the in-class activities. However, all the students of the groups participated in the activity, which enriched their professional vocabulary,

upgraded their public speaking skills, non-verbal communication, and time management skills.

**CONCLUSIONS.** After examining the teaching/learning process of Business English at the Armenian State University of Economics, particularly at the Department of Information Technologies and Data Science, we have observed that the most challenging aspect of learning Business English is oral communication. The students face the difficulties of expressing their thoughts on professional topics, and the problem is deeply rooted in their linguistic background.

We have conducted an experimental lesson to reveal the problems that hinder oral communication, while simultaneously applying some techniques borrowed from the TOEFL international exam. As a result, we have concluded that:

1. The factors that make speaking difficult are classified into linguistic - poor knowledge of grammar, syntax, word stock, and pronunciation, and extra-linguistic - inhibition, lack of enthusiasm, mother-tongue use, and low participation. The best way to overcome these obstacles has proven to be the implementation of interactive activities: individual presentations and the introduction of active listening tasks. Technological advancement facilitates the teaching/learning process, and it is easier to create an authentic atmosphere in class. Listening to language-carriers and repeating the words and expressions immediately after listening (shadowing) highly improves pronunciation, and students get used to an authentic English accent and syntax. Shadowing improves attention and the ability to concentrate as the learners listen and speak at the same time. This activity enables the students to acquire more accurate natural intonation and fluency. Active listening is also a safe bridge to the speaking activity, as there is little pressure, and the students don't have to express their own thoughts.
2. Business English lessons should be organized in a way to provide the students with practical skills essential for communication and interaction with language carriers. In addition, a lot of students intend to continue their education abroad or participate in student exchange programs, so teaching speaking is a must for international examinations. Taking into account these factors, we find it a good idea to adapt TOEFL and IELTS speaking activities and carry out such assignments during the lessons.

The speaking skill is a productive skill that reflects the knowledge of all the aspects of any language; in addition, students exercise critical thinking and non-verbal communication skills while speaking. Ultimately, speaking activities should prevail in the teaching/learning process.

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