Techniques for teaching speaking skills

What is “speaking”? 
Speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols, in a variety of contexts.

What does it mean to “teach speaking”? 
In the ESOL classroom, teaching speaking refers to many things:

✦ produce the English speech sounds and patterns
✦ use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns and the rhythm of the sound language
✦ select appropriate words and sentences according to the proper social setting, audience, situation and subject matter
✦ organize thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence
✦ expressing values and judgements
✦ using the language quickly and confidently with few unnatural pauses (fluency)

How to teach speaking in the classroom 
Many linguists and language teachers agree that students learn speaking skills best through “interacting”. Teachers should try to use “real” situations that require communication and collaboration (working together) between students.

Form, meaning and fluency 
When preparing a speaking skills lesson, should you focus more on form (grammar), meaning (expressing ideas clearly) or fluency (the ability to speak the language with ease, without too many pauses or searching)?

**Form** - For beginning students, it is often best to start with some simple memorized phrases, to help students understand the correct form of speaking. Repetition drills and substitution drills are helpful. In repetition drills, the teacher will vary the speed of the drill - starting slowly and increasing the speed as students learn the skill. In substitution drills, the teacher will teach one phrase and then begin to substitute words (example: I like candy. I like chicken. etc.) For more advanced students, teachers can introduce new grammar to the class by introducing phrases in speaking drills (example: to teach relative clauses - each student makes a statement about his/her mother - “My mother is a person who likes to grow flowers.” “My mother is a person who...”)

**Meaning** - Meaning focused speaking activities usually follow form focused activities. In meaning focused activities, the teacher usually provides a topic to the students and gives them a chance to work with partners or small groups to develop ideas on the topic and practice talking about the topic. For lower level students, teachers can give them topics such as animals and provide partners or groups questions to ask each other (example: which animal is your favorite? Why do you like that animal? What kind of animal would you like to be?” “Why?”) In this example, students are practicing and repeating simple forms and also adding extra information. For more advanced students, teachers can provide discussion topics to partners or small groups.

Adapted from an article by Kayriye Kayi and various other sources
Fluency - Fluency in speaking is the aim of many language learners. Signs of fluency include a reasonably fast speed of speaking and only a small number of pauses. These signs indicate that the speaker does not have to spend a lot of time searching for the language items needed to express the message.

4/3/2 is a useful technique for developing fluency and includes the features that are needed in fluency development activities. First the learners choose a topic or are given a topic with which they are very familiar. The first time that learners use this technique it may be best if the topic involves recounting (retelling) something that happened to them. This is because the chronological order of the events will make it easier to recall and repeat because the time sequence provides a clear structure for the talk. The learners work in pairs. Learner A tells a story to Learner B and has a time limit of four minutes to do this. B just listens and does not interrupt or question Learner A. When the four minutes are up, the teacher says, "Change partners"; learner A then moves to a new Learner B. The teacher says "Begin" and Learner A tells exactly the same story to the new partner but this time has only three minutes to tell it. When the three minutes are up, the teacher says "Stop. Change partners." With a new partner, Learner A now has two minutes to tell the story. During the three deliveries of the same story, the B learners do not talk and each listens to three different people. When the A learners have given their talk three times, the B learners can now go through the same sequence, this time as speakers.

Research on this activity shows that the learners' speed of speaking increased during the talks, the hesitations they make decrease, and surprisingly their grammatical errors in the repeated parts of the talk decrease and they tend to use several, more complex grammatical constructions in the last of the three talks than they did in the first talk.

When teaching speaking skills, focus on the following:

Low Beginning
Focus on simple information exchange, expressing thoughts and asking questions

High Beginning
Focus on using language to accomplish simple personal objectives appropriately

Low Intermediate
Focus on general discussion of a variety of topics and functioning well in social situations

High Intermediate
Focus on elaborating and supporting opinions as well as simple formal presentations

Advanced
Focus on formal presentations, polished conversation skills and idiomatic expression

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Activities to promote speaking:

Discussions
After a content-based lesson, a discussion can be held for various reasons. The students may aim to arrive at a conclusion, share ideas about an event, or find solutions in their discussion groups. Before the discussion, it is essential that the purpose of the discussion activity is set by the teacher. In this way, the discussion points are relevant to this purpose, so that students do not spend their time chatting with each other about irrelevant things. For example, students can become involved in agree/disagree discussions. In this type of discussions, the teacher can form groups of students, preferably 4 or 5 in each group, and provide controversial sentences like “people learn best when they read vs. people learn best when they travel”. Then each group works on their topic for a given time period, and presents their opinions to the class. It is essential that the speaking should be equally divided among group members. For efficient group discussions, it is always better not to form large groups, because quiet students may avoid contributing in large groups.

Role Play
One other way of getting students to speak is role-playing. Students pretend they are in various social contexts and have a variety of social roles. In role-play activities, the teacher gives information to the learners such as who they are and what they think or feel. Thus, the teacher can tell the student that "You are David, you go to the doctor and tell him what happened last night, and…"

Simulations
Simulations are very similar to role-plays but what makes simulations different than role plays is that they are more elaborate. In simulations, students can bring items to the class to create a realistic environment. For instance, if a student is acting as a singer, she brings a microphone to sing and so on. Role plays and simulations have many advantages. First, since they are entertaining, they motivate the students. Second, they increase the self-confidence of hesitant students, because in role play and simulation activities, they will have a different role and do not have to speak for themselves, which means they do not have to take the same responsibility.

Information Gap
In this activity, students are supposed to be working in pairs. One student will have the information that other partner does not have and the partners will share their information. Information gap activities serve many purposes such as solving a problem or collecting information. Also, each partner plays an important role because the task cannot be completed if the partners do not provide the information the others need. These activities are effective because everybody has the opportunity to talk extensively in the target language.

Brainstorming
On a given topic, students can produce ideas in a limited time. Depending on the context, either individual or group brainstorming is effective and learners generate ideas quickly and freely. The good characteristics of brainstorming is that the students are not criticized for their ideas so students will be open to sharing new ideas.

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Storytelling

Students can briefly summarize a tale or story they heard from somebody beforehand, or they may create their own stories to tell their classmates. Story telling fosters creative thinking. It also helps students express ideas in the format of beginning, development, and ending, including the characters and setting a story has to have. Students also can tell riddles or jokes. For instance, at the very beginning of each class session, the teacher may call a few students to tell short riddles or jokes as an opening. In this way, not only will the teacher address students’ speaking ability, but also get the attention of the class.

Interviews

Students can conduct interviews on selected topics with various people. It is a good idea that the teacher provides a rubric to students so that they know what type of questions they can ask or what path to follow, but students should prepare their own interview questions. Conducting interviews with people gives students a chance to practice their speaking ability not only in class but also outside and helps them becoming socialized. After interviews, each student can present his or her study to the class. Moreover, students can interview each other and "introduce" his or her partner to the class.

Story completion

This is a very enjoyable, whole-class, free-speaking activity for which students sit in a circle. For this activity, a teacher starts to tell a story, but after a few sentences he or she stops narrating. Then, each student starts to narrate from the point where the previous one stopped. Each student is supposed to add from four to ten sentences. Students can add new characters, events, descriptions and so on.

Reporting

Before coming to class, students are asked to read a newspaper or magazine and, in class, they report to their friends what they find as the most interesting news. Students can also talk about whether they have experienced anything worth telling their friends in their daily lives before class.

Picture describing

One way to make use of pictures in a speaking activity is to give students just one picture and having them describe what it is in the picture. For this activity students can form groups and each group is given a different picture. Students discuss the picture with their groups, then a spokesperson for each group describes the picture to the whole class. This activity fosters the creativity and imagination of the learners as well as their public speaking skills.

Find the difference

For this activity students can work in pairs and each couple is given two different pictures, for example, picture of boys playing football and another picture of girls playing tennis. Students in pairs discuss the similarities and/or differences in the pictures.

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