

Conversational Practice: The Key to Fluency



Rita, Taiwan

“I studied English for 12 years – seven years in public school, four years in university, and another year of private study for six to ten hours per day. In school, we spent a lot of time on reading and writing. “Conversation” had nothing to do with the government English exams. You would get a perfect score if you remembered everything in the textbook. So, we spent a lot of time on writing and reading. We rarely practiced oral English.”

In her late twenties, Rita moved to Canada and discovered that, despite all her years of study, she couldn't carry on a conversation in English. Rita's story is not unique. Sadly, it is far too common. Anyone who has spoken with English learners from Korea, Japan, China, Mexico, Chile, or a dozen other countries has heard variations on this story.

How is it that smart, dedicated people like Rita can spend years studying English and yet not be able to speak English? In simple terms, it's because they don't get enough opportunities to engage in spontaneous English conversations.

The short commentaries below explain why conversational practice is so important if you want to speak English.

Knowing More Grammar and Vocabulary Doesn't Help

Far too often, the focus for people learning English as a second or foreign language is on accuracy (correctness), rather than on fluency (the ability to communicate). English language classes often focus almost exclusively on correcting errors in grammar and vocabulary (and pronunciation, in those instances where speaking is part of the curriculum). Unfortunately, this focus on accuracy usually comes at the expense of fluency, and results in an inability to communicate naturally and spontaneously.



In order to develop the ability to speak fluently, it is essential to engage in frequent unscripted conversational activities where the focus is simply on communicating.



By the time an English-speaking child has reached the age of three, she has probably spent between 5,000 and 10,000 hours listening to English conversation, and between 3,000 and 7,000 hours speaking English. Of course the child didn't think of this as "practice." She was simply trying to understand and communicate with those around her.

In her efforts to communicate with those around her, the child's only goal was to grasp the essence of what she heard and to make herself understood. The child didn't worry about whether she understood every word that was being said. And she didn't worry about whether she always used the right word, or the right grammar, or the right pronunciation. As long as the child could figure out the gist of what others said and could convey her own meaning, she could happily carry on a conversation.

At no time did the child feel that she should wait to start talking until she could do so perfectly. Although adults and older children used good grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation when speaking with the child, they didn't interrupt the child every time she spoke in order to correct her mistakes. So the child gained confidence in her ability to carry on a conversation, became accustomed to hearing herself speaking aloud, and was able to speak naturally and spontaneously.

Of course some knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar is required in order to speak English. And sometimes it is important to focus on accuracy. Yet theoretical knowledge of English grammar is often much better among non-native English speakers than among native English speakers. And many people learning English have memorized thousands of English words. Yet they cannot carry on a conversation in English. In contrast, an English-speaking three-year-old has no difficulty carrying on an animated conversation with a stranger about an unfamiliar topic, even though she cannot read or write, has no formal knowledge of grammar and has a vocabulary of only 1000 words. Why? It comes down to two things: (a) lots of unconstrained practice and (b) a lack of psychological barriers.

People who learn English as a foreign language often learn to read and write quite well, yet they frequently find it next to impossible to carry on a conversation in English. Why is this? One reason is that orality (the ability to listen and speak) uses different parts of the brain and is fundamentally different than literacy (the ability to read and write). The table below describes some of these differences.

Reading and Writing	Speaking and Listening
Visual/Manual	Auditory/Lingual
<p>Reading and writing use the visual centres of the brain and the parts of the brain associated with manual motor skills.</p>	<p>Speaking and listening use the auditory centres of the brain and the parts of the brain associated with motor control of the mouth, lips, tongue, jaw, throat and breathing.</p>
<p>The reader learns to recognize the shapes of letters and the patterns that letters form when made into words. The reader learns to associate meanings with the visual representation of words on the page.</p>	<p>The listener learns to distinguish the sounds (phonemes) used to produce words, and to associate meaning with the sounds used to represent words and phrases.</p>
<p>The writer learns to manipulate a writing implement to form the shapes of letters, and to join those letters into patterns that form words.</p>	<p>The speaker learns to control the body's speech production mechanisms, and to create sounds that convey meaning.</p>
Self-representation is visual	Self-representation is aural
<p>The writer can recognize his/her own handwriting.</p>	<p>The speaker can recognize his/her own voice</p>
<p>The writer's sense of self is not strongly associated with the visual representation of the words on the page or screen.</p>	<p>The sound of the speaker's voice is strongly associated with the speaker's sense of self.</p>
Not time sensitive	Very time sensitive
<p>Readers can adjust the pace at which they read or write.</p>	<p>Individuals have little control over the pace at which aural information is received. Information must be processed at the rate it is delivered.</p>
<p>Readers can take time to puzzle out or look up meanings or translate between languages.</p>	<p>Listeners cannot pause the flow of information in order to puzzle out meaning or mentally translate between languages.</p>
<p>Writers can take time to search for vocabulary, check grammar or translate between languages.</p>	<p>Speakers must use vocabulary and grammar spontaneously. Pauses to search for vocabulary, check grammar or translate between languages will make conversations awkward.</p>
Potentially non-linear	Always linear
<p>The reader may skip unfamiliar material and revisit it later, allowing unfamiliar material to be deciphered in the light of later information.</p>	<p>The listener must be able to grasp the gist of information in real time in the order in which it is received.</p>



Given the fundamental differences between literacy and orality, it is hardly surprising that the development of reading and writing skills does little to improve speaking and listening skills.

While a disconnect between literacy and orality exists in all languages, it is exaggerated in English compared to some other languages due to the non-phonetic nature of the English language. (I.e., English there is no consistent relationship between English spelling and the pronunciation of words.)

Because speaking and listening use different parts of the brain and have very different characteristics than reading and writing, it is not surprising that different methods are required to develop these skills. If you want to be able to carry on a conversation, then you have to practice spontaneous speaking and listening every day.

“Listen and Repeat” Is Not Enough

Real conversation requires that you communicate ideas quickly and spontaneously. And no amount of “listen and repeat” exercises or memorization of sentences from textbooks will prepare you to do that. Sure, listening to people speak English is useful. It helps attune your ear to the rhythms and sounds of English, and helps you understand native English speakers (if you do it enough). And repeating English phrases aloud allows you to practice speaking aloud. But there’s only one way you will become comfortable having conversations in English: practice having conversations in English!



By engaging in unscripted conversations every day, you are training your brain to listen for the gist of what others are saying and to quickly formulate phrases in English that communicate your ideas. The more unscripted conversations you have, the more readily and fluently you will be able to express yourself in English.

The Fear Factor

Among the most common barriers to speaking English, especially for teens and adults, are fear and anxiety. The fear of being laughed at, making a mistake, saying the wrong thing, sounding stupid can be a huge hurdle for English language learners to overcome.

Most people who have learned a foreign language as adults are familiar with the tightness in the chest and anxiety that accompanies their attempts to communicate in the new language. Faced with this fear, many English language learners remain silent or use only a handful of memorized phrases. In order to overcome this fear, English language learners need a safe situation for practice where they can take risks and experiment with using the language out loud without the danger of embarrassing themselves.



Like any fear, the best way of conquering the fear of speaking English is to do it. The more you practice having spontaneous, unscripted conversations the more confident you will be in real conversational situations.

Summary

Over one billion people in the world are trying to learn English right now. Most will learn to read and write well, but very few will feel comfortable actually speaking English. Why? Because they will have little or no opportunity to practice English conversation.

Here's why regular practice is critical to conversational fluency:

- Knowing more grammar and vocabulary doesn't help with conversational fluency;
- "Speaking and Listening" are fundamentally different than "Reading and Writing": they use different parts of the brain and have very different characteristics;
- "Listen & Repeat" is not enough. Real conversation requires that you communicate ideas quickly and spontaneously. No amount of "listen and repeat" or memorization of sentences from textbooks will prepare you to do that;
- Among the most common barriers to speaking English are fear and anxiety. The best way of conquering this fear is lots of practice in a safe environment;
- When our brain hears us speaking a different language it experiences cognitive dissonance that interferes with conversational fluency. By regularly exposing your brain to the sound of yourself speaking English you can build a new audio image of yourself that your brain will accept.