

how to teach speaking by scott thornbury

How to Teach Speaking by Scott Thornbury: A Comprehensive Guide

Are you a teacher grappling with how to effectively teach speaking skills? Do you feel like your students aren't progressing as quickly as you'd like? Then you've come to the right place. This comprehensive guide delves into the insightful methods presented by renowned ELT expert Scott Thornbury in his work on teaching speaking. We'll unpack his key principles, offering practical strategies and examples you can implement in your classroom tomorrow. Get ready to transform your speaking classes and unlock your students' fluency potential!

Understanding Thornbury's Approach to Teaching Speaking

Scott Thornbury, a highly influential figure in English Language Teaching (ELT), doesn't offer a single, rigid methodology. Instead, his work emphasizes a nuanced, learner-centered approach that acknowledges the complexity of speaking. He rejects the idea of teaching speaking as a set of isolated skills to be mastered individually. Instead, he champions a holistic view, focusing on developing fluency and communicative competence.

Thornbury highlights the crucial interplay between fluency and accuracy. He argues against an overemphasis on grammatical accuracy at the expense of fluent communication. He believes that fluency, the ability to speak effortlessly and spontaneously, is the foundation upon which accuracy can be built. This means creating a classroom environment where students feel comfortable taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from them.

Key Principles from Thornbury's Work

Several core principles underpin Thornbury's approach:

1. **Focus on Fluency First:** Thornbury advocates for prioritizing fluency activities. This involves creating opportunities for students to speak extensively, without constant interruption for grammatical corrections. Think of activities like role-plays, discussions, presentations, and improvisations. The goal is to get students talking, building confidence and fluency. Accuracy can be addressed later through focused feedback.

1. The Importance of Meaningful Interaction: Mere repetition or drills are insufficient for developing genuine speaking skills. Thornbury stresses the importance of meaningful interaction, where students engage in communication with a purpose. This could involve completing tasks collaboratively, negotiating meanings, or expressing personal opinions. The context should be engaging and relevant to the learners' lives.
1. Scaffolding and Support: Thornbury acknowledges that learners require varying levels of support depending on their proficiency. He advocates for scaffolding, providing learners with the necessary tools and structures to facilitate their communication. This might involve providing sentence starters, visual aids, or pre-teaching key vocabulary. The scaffolding should gradually be withdrawn as learners gain confidence.
1. Feedback and Reflection: Effective feedback is crucial for improving speaking skills. Thornbury suggests focusing on both fluency and accuracy, but prioritizing feedback that promotes improvement without discouraging students. He recommends offering feedback that is specific, constructive, and focuses on what the learner can do to improve. Encouraging self-reflection through journaling or peer feedback can also enhance learning.
1. The Role of the Teacher: The teacher's role in Thornbury's framework is not just to deliver information but to facilitate learning. This means creating a supportive and stimulating environment, providing appropriate scaffolding, offering constructive feedback, and designing engaging tasks. The teacher acts as a facilitator, guiding learners rather than dictating instruction.

Practical Activities Inspired by Thornbury's Principles

Let's translate these principles into actionable classroom activities:

Information Gap Activities: These activities require students to collaborate to share information, forcing them to use language naturally. Examples include jigsaw reading, where students read different parts of a text and

then share information to reconstruct the whole story.

Role-Plays and Simulations: Role-plays provide authentic communicative contexts. Students can practice specific language functions, such as making complaints, ordering food, or negotiating a deal. Simulations can involve more complex scenarios, requiring problem-solving and collaborative communication.

Discussions and Debates: Engaging students in discussions on relevant topics encourages spontaneous speech. Debates can further challenge students to articulate their viewpoints and engage in persuasive communication.

Presentations and Storytelling: Giving presentations or telling stories allows students to demonstrate their fluency and creativity. These activities can be scaffolded with visual aids or outlines to support learners.

Collaborative Writing and Speaking: Combining writing and speaking activities, such as collaboratively writing a story and then performing it, integrates different skills and promotes deeper understanding.

Integrating Thornbury's Ideas into Your Teaching

Successfully integrating Thornbury's ideas requires a shift in mindset. It's about moving away from a purely grammar-focused approach and embracing a more communicative, learner-centered methodology. Observe your students, assess their needs, and adapt activities accordingly. Remember that mistakes are opportunities for learning, and fluency is the foundation for accurate language use. Start small, experiment with different activities, and observe the impact on your students' speaking skills.

Conclusion

Teaching speaking effectively requires a holistic approach that prioritizes fluency, meaningful interaction, and constructive feedback. Scott Thornbury's work offers a valuable framework for achieving this. By focusing on learner-centered activities, providing appropriate scaffolding, and fostering a supportive classroom environment, you can significantly improve your students' speaking skills and empower them to communicate confidently and effectively. Embrace the principles outlined above, adapt them to your own context, and watch your students flourish.

FAQs

1. How can I effectively provide feedback without discouraging students? Focus on positive aspects of their performance first, then offer specific, actionable suggestions for improvement. Avoid overwhelming students with too much criticism at once.

1. What if my students are reluctant to speak? Create a safe and supportive classroom environment where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities. Start with low-pressure activities and gradually increase the challenge. Use pair work and group work to reduce anxiety.
1. How can I adapt Thornbury's principles to different language levels? Scaffold activities based on your students' proficiency. Provide more support for lower-level learners, and gradually reduce scaffolding as their skills develop.
1. Are there any specific resources you recommend for further reading on Thornbury's approach? Explore Thornbury's books, such as "About Language," "Beyond the Sentence," and "An A-Z of ELT." Also, search for articles and presentations by him online.
1. How can I assess students' speaking progress effectively? Use a combination of methods, such as observing student performance in class, using rubrics to assess specific speaking skills, and employing self and peer assessment. Focus on both fluency and accuracy.

Additional Resources

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