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Teaching L2 Speaking: Recommending a Holistic Approach

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Abstract

Speaking is often considered one of the most difficult skills to develop in a second or foreign language. Many traditional approaches to language teaching focus on text-based skill development or emphasize aural receptive skills. However, as English continues to grow as a global language, learners want and need to be able to express their ideas through speech. It is no surprise then that most recent approaches to teaching stress the importance of developing communicative skills. Unfortunately, many lack systematic procedures, are atheoretical, and/or have not been supported by empirical research. Therefore, this article will provide an overview of teaching approaches and methods as they relate to speaking instruction. Such a review would be trivial without making recommendations for practice, so one particular approach will be highlighted and then justified based on its sound theoretical underpinnings and empirical support for several of its defining characteristics. Implications for teachers will be discussed throughout.

INTRODUCTION

Despite it being reported that many students and instructors find speaking to be one of the most problematic of the four skills (e.g. Tatzl, 2011), speaking has been researched far less than other skills such as reading, writing, and listening (Hughes, 2017). Among the paucity of studies that do exist, there tends to be a much greater focus on academic presentations (e.g. Evans, 2013)—i.e. decontextualized speech events—rather than other forms of speech. To compound this issue, research is often separated from practice, especially in regards to speaking. In many studies, only the product of instruction, the performance of speech, has been reported. Another issue is that speaking is not discreet from other skills (Hughes, 2017). In searching for empirical research on 'speaking', 'speech', or, for the purpose of this essay, 'speaking instruction', few methodologically sound empirical papers related to approaches to instruction appear as results; many more studies relate to the products of instruction or related aspects such as working memory and task complexity, for example. Therefore, it is difficult to determine what approach was used to teach the participants in the studies reviewed; in many cases, an approach must be inferred or only certain aspects of a particular method can be investigated with the results extrapolated to what could potentially occur if such a method

were used. These issues make it particularly difficult to find empirically sound studies on approaches to speaking instruction. Practitioners looking to enhance their craft by referring to research may find themselves at a loss.

This paper will begin by briefly outlining the evolution of language teaching approaches and methods, focusing on the role of speaking instruction. Moving forward, I will discuss how conceptual literature has situated the teaching of speaking at present. I will then discuss binary perspectives in regards to speaking instruction that utilize either an indirect or direct approach; benefits and drawbacks will be elucidated upon for each approach. Next, I will recommend a blended/holistic approach put forward by Goh and Burns (2012). This approach not only calls for the blending of indirect and direct paradigms but does so while placing prime importance on pre-task planning, task repetition, and metacognition, aspects often neglected or only interspersed in other approaches. I will refer to empirical studies and conceptual literature to justify such an approach and in order to draw conclusions regarding the implications for best practice in teaching L2 speaking.

Approaches to speaking instruction

Richards and Schmidt (2010) define an approach in language teaching as 'the theory, philosophy and principles underlying a particular set of teaching practices' (p. 30). An approach will serve as an overarching guide to what method, or general principles and procedures used to administer instruction, will be applied. The chosen method will operate as a guide for what specific procedures employed in activities, or techniques, are utilized (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). It should be noted that in theory, the terms approach and method are distinctive. However, in the literature, some writers appear to use the terms interchangeably. This may cause some confusion as readers attempt to distinguish between the two. Nevertheless, it may be even more confusing to change the names of specific concepts in this paper in order to be consistent. Therefore, in all instances, I have used the original term provided in the literature. In the following section, I will provide a brief review of language teaching approaches and methods as they pertain to speaking instruction. Looking back before looking forward will aid in situating current ideas in relation to their historical context.

Historical approaches and methods

Arguably the earliest method, Grammar-Translation laid minimal emphasis on speaking, while many others that followed (e.g. the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method, and the Situational Method) emphasized oracy dramatically more but in different ways (for a detailed review, see Richards & Rodgers, 2014). While some approaches and methods emerged simply from language teachers' intuitions and naïve theory, others were grounded firmly in theory heavily researched in other fields (Nunan, 2004). The Audiolingual Method, for example, which can be linked to structural linguistics and behavioral psychology, treated language learning—and speech by extension—as a set of habits/behaviors that learners could be trained to reproduce (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011); instruction was centered on drills and repetition. However, as with all fields, when underlying theories are challenged, new areas for change materialize. Steering this change in the early 1960's was Chomsky (1965), who claimed that

language learning was more than just habit formation and that learners have both linguistic competence (knowledge about the language) and linguistic performance (the language as it is actually used). Hymes' (1972) notion of communicative competence, expanded upon and challenged this idea, adding that in order to be competent, learners must also have social knowledge in addition to linguistic knowledge that enables them to know when and in what ways to use the target language. Although the concept has seen many variations since becoming a key feature in the discourse of language instruction (e.g. Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, & Thurrell, 1995), Leung (2005) credits Hymes' idea of communicative competence, among other theories at the time, as a major catalyst for the development of the Communicative Approach / Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). A host of approaches and methods based on sociocognitive and sociocultural views of language learning arose in the years that followed.

Despite the perceived utility of methods, Richards and Rodgers (2014) state that by the end of the twentieth century, methods were no longer considered explanatory for learners' success. They state that generic methods did not fit the needs of learners in all contexts, lacked empirical evidence of effectiveness in research, and did not take into account both teachers' and students' own knowledge, background, and potential for autonomy. The current post-methods era situated within its hierarchical-superior predecessor, the Communicative Approach, is generally where speaking instruction exists today (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In the following section, I will describe indirect and direct approaches to speaking instruction as part of the CLT paradigm, drawing from several conceptual papers to address issues with each. Later, I will refer back to this concept of a post-methods era and argue that a systematic method for speaking instruction based on empirical research is needed.

Indirect and direct approaches to speaking instruction

Situated under the CLT umbrella, an indirect approach to speaking instruction is realized when learners are put in situations to use language with the aim that through this usage they will acquire language and improve their speaking (Richards, 2008). Conversely, a direct approach to speaking instruction sets micro-level targets for specific conversational features, skills, and strategies to be practiced in a variety of more controlled activities (Richards, 1990, 2008). In this approach, a structural focus on language forms, both grammar and pronunciation, and language analysis is usually employed (Goh & Burns, 2012).

An indirect approach focuses on what learners can do with the language rather than the technical aspects of their specific usage such as pronunciation or grammatical accuracy. Instead, fluency and functional use of language is emphasized (Goh & Burns, 2012). As such, an indirect approach typically aligns with task-based instruction (TBI), for example, which focuses on learners drawing upon any of their own language resources to communicate meaning (Ellis, 2009). Swan (2005) challenged the notion that learners can do more than consolidate the language they have already acquired during TBI, an indirect approach. Swan states that there is no convincing empirical evidence to justify implementing TBI and that students have had great success with more traditional (direct) approaches for many years. Swan's recommendation is to implement a structural syllabus in tandem with TBI, an inherently indirect approach, cre-

ating what he calls an integrated approach. In regards to speaking instruction, an integrated approach may involve adding elements typically considered akin to direct approaches to speaking instruction (e.g. explicit focus on form, backchannel, and turn-taking, among others).

In response to Swan, and other critics, Ellis (2009) and Long (2016) have expanded their initial conceptualizations of TBI. In doing so, they have adopted what are typically considered features of a direct approach to speaking instruction: attention to pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, and error correction, for example. So, TBI, which originated as a strong form of CLT, purely indirect in nature, has become a blending of the two. This modification illustrates how the conceptualization of TBI has evolved to accept both indirect and direct techniques, unwillingly and inexplicitly at first. However, recently, some theorists have purposefully blended these seemingly dichotomous approaches, as described below.

Goh and Burns (2012) maintain that there are issues with both indirect and direct approaches, stating that 'neither of them effectively supports all the processes of second language speaking development' (p.135). An indirect approach lacks focus on form and accuracy, while a direct approach fails to develop fluency, spontaneity, and complexity (Bygate, 1987). Bygate's own approach is blended, adding the micro-skills of meaning negotiation and interaction management with more indirect group tasks. Littlewood's (1992) approach is similar, also stressing a combination of direct practice (language items) with indirect practice (communication skills). And finally, Thornbury (2005) also demonstrates blending in his three-stage procedural approach of awareness raising, appropriation, and autonomy. What Thornbury (2005) has done is provide a loose framework in his recommendation, offering explicit stages that teachers can work through when structuring their lessons. This type of organization moves one step further towards a developed method rather than a general approach.

A holistic approach

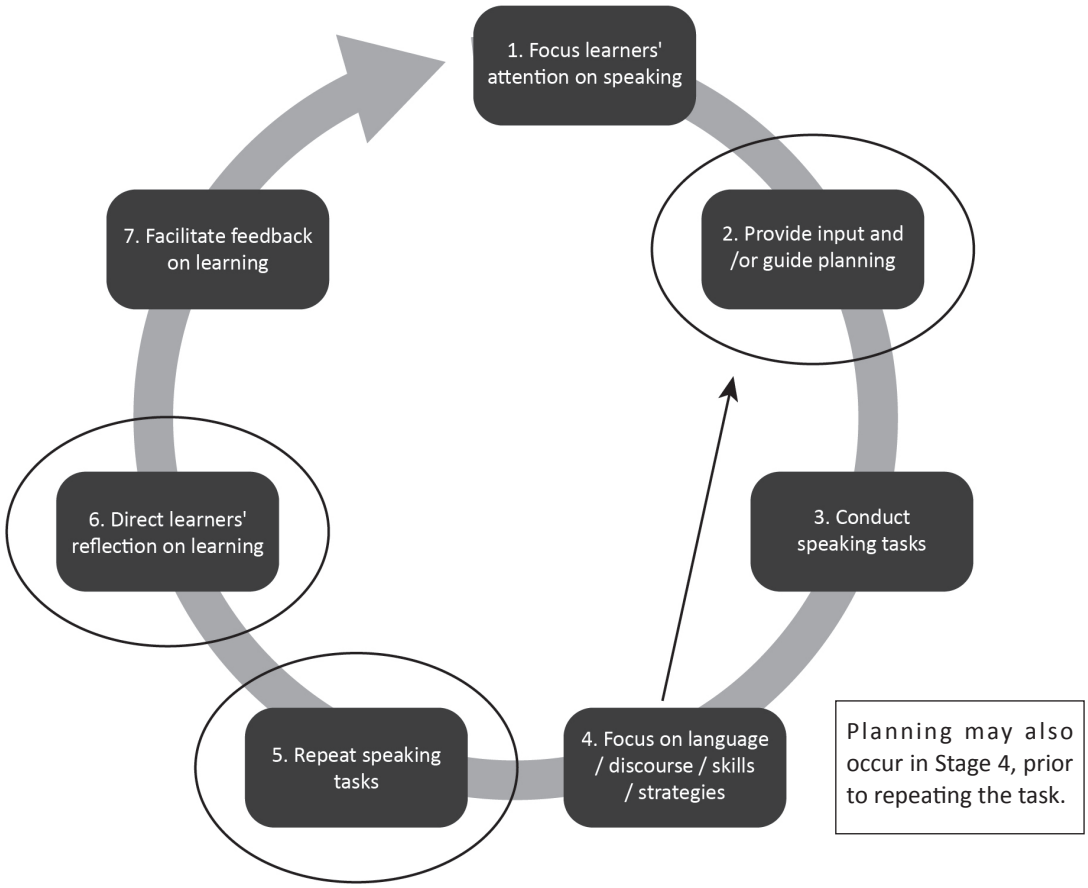
One approach put forward in recent years that exploits the idea of blending indirect and direct approaches to speaking instruction is Goh and Burns' (2012) holistic approach. Not only does it incorporate aspects of both indirect and direct approaches, but it also includes a heavy focus on pre-task planning, task repetition, and metacognition to help guide and regulate these processes. These activities may occasionally be included in other approaches (see above) but are fundamental to the holistic approach. A definition, brief note on purpose, and reference to the underlying theory of each aspect as it relates to speaking can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Key aspects in a holistic approach

	Definition	Purpose	Underlying Theory
Pre-task planning	Allowing learners time to conceptualize and formulate what to say and how to say it	To alleviate the cognitive demands of free speech, allowing learners to focus on aspects of articulation and self-monitoring / repair	A cognitive approach to language learning and speech development (Skehan, 1998; Segalowitz, 2010)
Task repetition	Repeating a speaking task once or multiple times immediately or at a later instance, under the same or different conditions, and with the same or different content	To improve upon the first performance by automatizing and reusing previously produced speech, reducing the attentional resources required to formulate utterances	Speaking is the result of complex cognitive processes (Levelt, 1989; Bygate, 1998)
Metacognition	The process of thinking or reflecting on one's cognitive processes	To become aware of one's own knowledge of self, task, and strategies in order to control and manipulate the cognitive processes of planning, monitoring, and evaluation	An awareness of cognitive processes and the ability to plan, monitor, and evaluate them is beneficial for learning (Chamot, 2005; Flavell, 1976; Wenden, 2001)

Based on Goh (2017); Goh & Burns (2012)

Below, Figure 1 is an example of what the procedures would look like for a speaking lesson using Goh and Burns' holistic approach. At first glance, it may not seem very different from traditional blended approaches (see discussion above), but its emphasis on pre-task planning, task repetition, and reflection, as guided by the principles of metacognition, differentiates it from less structured approaches and provides a strong theoretical grounding as a sociocognitive approach. Each stage can be validated by researchers and easily followed by classroom practitioners. Its grounding and systematic procedures are a step in the right direction in being able to offer pedagogical implications for teachers based on empirical research. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to describe each stage in detail or attempt to validate every procedure due to word-limit constraints, I will discuss the distinctive features of pre-task planning and task repetition in the face of empirical research, highlighting the influence of metacognition as the glue that can serve to facilitate these processes.



Adapted from Goh & Burns (2012) p.153

Figure 1 The teaching-speaking cycle

Empirical research on academic speaking

In a narrative review of research into scaffolding processes teachers can apply to improve speaking performance, Goh (2017) illustrates how task repetition has not been applied well and how pre-task planning has been applied only reasonably well in the studies she reviewed on speaking (see Table 1 for definitions, purpose, and underlying theory). It is for this reason, and those mentioned above, that I have chosen studies that focus on these aspects to discuss. Moreover, pre-task planning and task repetition are uniquely fundamental to Goh and Burn's (2012) holistic approach. In order to link the findings from the studies in a way that is comparable, I have chosen recent studies with a focus on fluency rather than accuracy or complexity. This is also due to fluency being regarded as the goal of most approaches to speaking instruction today (Richards, 2008). The target groups are also similar: East Asian, L2 English speaking undergraduate students.

Pre-task planning

Bui and Huang (2018) investigated the effects of pre-task planning and content familiarity on L2 fluency. The participants (N = 58) were L1 Cantonese undergraduate students at a university in Hong Kong. The participants were asked to speak about two topics: one they were familiar with and another with which they were less familiar. Half of the participants were given 10 minutes to plan their speech while the other half had no time to plan. The participants were required to produce at least ten sentences. All means were standardized per 100 words to make the data comparable.

The results show that both content familiarity and pre-task planning increase the rate of speech and decrease the amount of silence in the participants' responses; however, the effect sizes for planning were more than three times the size of those for content familiarity. In fact, planning had a greater effect in all aspects measured, including the total number of words produced (x = .14), length of run before breakdown or repair (d = .53), a decrease in the total number of repairs such as false starts, reformulations, and repetitions (d = .75-1.14), and a reduction of the total number, average length, and total silence of mid-clause pauses. According to Skehan (2009), native speakers are more likely to pause at the end of clauses; therefore, mid-clause pausing is viewed as a sign of dysfluency in learner speech. With planning, the participants were able to reduce their mid-clause pauses and mitigate the effect of their lack of topic knowledge. While content familiarity may assist in some aspects of fluency, pre-task planning improved all aspects measured. Pedagogically, this particular study shows that if time constraints exist in a speaking lesson, time spent on content familiarity enhancement, as often seen in pre-task activities designed to activate students' schemata (background knowledge), may be better spent on pre-task planning instead—a critical stage in a holistic approach to teaching speaking.

Task repetition

Lambert, Kormos, and Minn (2017) examined the effect of aural-oral repetition on speech-rate, pausing, and self-repair. By repeating a task, it was expected that attentional resources dedicated to the conceptualization, formulation, and monitoring of the message will be required to a lesser extent, allowing speech production to be less dependent on cognitive resources and, in turn, be more fluent. The participants (N = 32) were native Japanese learners of English aged 18-23 studying at a university in Japan. They were separated into three groups based on their respective proficiency levels. The procedure involved learners repeating three different speaking tasks (instruction, narration, opinion) six times, with a different interlocutor each time (one speaking, the other listening, and then switching). A post-task questionnaire was given to gauge participant perceptions of the task. By the end of the study, 576 task performances were transcribed, after which, speech rate, pausing, and self-repair were calculated.

The results show that up to five repetitions of a task may enhance student performance, as per the authors' hypothesis, which they attributed to enhanced priming, activation, and optimized linguistic encoding through each repetition. No significant difference was found in the degree of improvement between all three levels of proficiency or task. Students at all levels improved with repetition. The questionnaire on student perceptions indicated that students felt

as though their speech improved through repetition. Additional opportunities to perform was cited as important. Although none of the participants indicated being fatigued by performing six repetitions, five repetitions was shown to be the optimal number. As with pre-task planning, task repetition can be beneficial to improving academic speaking. When learners are aware of their own learning—are able to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning—through metacognition, these activities are likely to increase in their level of effectiveness.

The role of metacognition

Metacognition can be viewed as the glue that holds activities such as pre-task planning and task repetition together when these actions have become self-regulated. It is also realized, perhaps to a greater extent, in stage six of the teaching-speaking cycle (see Table 2), and is thus critical for implementing Goh and Burns' (2012) holistic approach. Metacognition has been heavily researched and has steadily evolved since its initial conception in the 1970's. Promulgated originally by Flavell (1976), the concept of metacognition 'refers to one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes or products or anything related to them' (Flavell, 1976, p.232); it is 'cognition about cognitive phenomena' (Flavell, 1979, p.906). In a synthesis of multiple definitions and interpretations, Lai (2011) highlights a division of the term, segmenting it into two constituent sections: knowledge about cognition and monitoring of cognition.

For Flavell (see also Zhang & Zhang, 2013), metacognitive knowledge has three subsets: knowledge of person/self, task, and strategy. Person knowledge encompasses a consciousness of both self learning cognition and the learning of others in relation to self. Being aware of personal strengths and weaknesses influences how tasks are mentally assessed in terms of complexity. This task knowledge aids in choosing an appropriate strategy to complete the task. Strategy knowledge is critical for metacognition as Anderson (2012) indicates: 'Without the knowledge of the range of strategies available for addressing a learning challenge, learners do not have the strategic behaviors available to them to accomplish their learning goals and tasks' (p.170). Therefore, the three subsets of knowledge exist and interact much like a dynamic, adaptive system with each set having an influence on the others.

To view metacognition simply as knowledge ignores the regulation and execution aspects of the concept (Flavell, 1979). These aspects are also strategic. Pinter (2011) distinguishes between these two concepts, stating that 'metacognition refers to our knowledge and understanding about thinking, how the mind functions', whereas, '[m]etacognitive strategies are those that allow us to plan, monitor, and evaluate our learning and thinking' (p.31). Anderson's (2012) conception of metacognition places profound weight on what Pinter calls metacognitive strategies as part of a 'kaleidoscopic view' of five subdivisions of metacognition as follows: '1) preparing and planning for effective learning; 2) deciding when to use particular strategies; 3) knowing how to monitor strategy use; 4) learning how to combine various strategies; and 5) evaluating the effectiveness of strategy use' (Anderson, 2012, p.171). In a speaking task, for example, a learner thinking metacognitively may use knowledge of his or her own strengths and weaknesses to decide on particular strategies to use to overcome the challenges of the task. This thought process incorporates all aspects of metacognitive knowledge and also metacognitive strategy, as described above. In the teaching-speaking cycle, this metacognitive process can be

realized in nearly all stages, as metacognition may occur during pre-task planning and focusing (stage 2 and 4), during performance of the task itself as an online process (stages 3 and 5), and in reflecting on one's own performance (stage 6).

In shifting the focus from general learning and language learning to the idea of academic speaking, it is clear how the influence of a pedagogical plan, and a competent instructor, can modify existing metacognitive knowledge/beliefs and strategies throughout a lesson or, better yet, a course of study. Teachers can play a significant, and often necessary, role in the process of helping learners transition from being other-regulated to self-regulated (Thomas & Rose, 2019). Many learners need to be taught how to learn effectively, what strategies to use, and how to use them. Therefore, teaching L2 speaking successfully, among other skills, may benefit from having a systematic methodology such as the teaching-speaking cycle in Goh and Burns' (2012) holistic approach.

Williams, Mercer, and Ryan (2015) stress that learners who are proficient at the use of metacognitive strategies, and in turn, are more metacognitively aware, perform better than those who are not. The writers emphasize the importance of teaching and training metacognitive strategies to facilitate the development of learning, autonomy, and agency. As Anderson (2012) insists, 'thinking about what happens in the learning process leads to stronger learning skills' (p.172). Purely indirect approaches may lack such a foundation, giving students too much autonomy in the beginning. Too much autonomy too early can actually hinder students' speaking improvement rather than enrich it, as practice must be enhanced and supported by effective pedagogy (Goh, 2017).

While the field of language learning strategies as whole has been attacked for flimsy conceptualizations and equally unreliable measurements of strategies (see Dornyei, 2005; Thomas, Rose, & Pojanapunya, 2019), work in the field of metacognitive strategies has eluded such heated debate. In fact, Ardasheva's (2016) study of L2 English learners determined that metacognitive strategy use was the most robust predictor of English competence and the only type of strategy that could prognosticate academic achievement. Moreover, the findings of Forbes and Fisher's (2018) recent study of language learners indicate that using metacognitive strategies while speaking could have a positive influence on students' proficiency levels as well as their confidence, the latter an issue often neglected yet worth mentioning.

Many current pedagogies focus too much on simply getting students to speak, with no strategic or systematic way of enhancing their speech (Hughes, 2017). For students whose willingness to communicate may be low and are unprepared to regulate their own learning, scaffolded, other-regulated strategies can help to provide them with opportunities to participate legitimately (see Thomas, 2018; Thomas & Rose, 2019). For students who are willing to participate in spoken discourse, plans must be in place to effectively monitor and attempt to improve their L2 oral production. In the early stages, these plans may be regulated by the teacher. Over time, students may develop more autonomy and work their way towards self-regulation. Guiding students to become metacognitively aware and to use of metacognitive strategies effectively is one of the single most important aspects of the teaching-speaking cycle in Goh and Burns' (2012) holistic approach.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have argued that a clearly defined method based on empirical research rather than intuition is needed to improve L2 speaking instruction in university settings. Goh and Burns' (2012) holistic approach appears to be close to filling that gap. More research is needed to validate each stage of the teaching-speaking model, but the two studies relating to pre-task planning and task repetition discussed in detail earlier in this paper show signs of promise. Metacognition, however, has already been proven to be a sound construct. Some may argue that the holistic approach is merely a blending of indirect and direct approaches; nevertheless, I contend that it goes beyond the confines of the blended approaches mentioned previously and stands out on its own due to its sociocognitive grounding and structured procedures that appear more method than general approach. My recommendation to teachers of L2 speaking is to experiment with the teaching-speaking cycle if possible, and at the very least, incorporate the aspects of pre-task planning, task repetition, and metacognitive training into their courses; these have, at least in the studies reviewed, been identified as beneficial in enhancing L2 speaking performance.

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