

## **Engaging Minds and Enhancing Speech Through Motivational Activities for EFL Learners**

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The Asian Conference on Education 2025  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

It can hardly be denied that speaking is a vital yet challenging skill for learners. It is a productive skill that involves interaction, as well as aural comprehension. Needless to say that other factors such as student motivation and classroom environment can also have their impact on oral production. One can often hear complaints that it is easier to read, listen and understand than get involved in a short dialogue in the target language, in this case – English. The responsibility seems to be more on one stakeholder – the teacher, who has to actually teach her students to use the language and be able to express ideas in that language. A simple solution to face all these challenges is through creative tasks. A number of studies come to advocate that promoting creativity can lead to improvements in speaking skills in various educational contexts. By synthesizing creativity with practical speaking activities, the teacher can help students develop their speaking skills in engaging, enjoyable and efficient ways. This article gives a brief overview of speaking as a skill that combines a number of abilities, and offers an insight into contextual and interactional factors. A discussion on the need for communicative approach through creative activities will follow, flavored with suggestions of several classroom tasks, including rap songs, storytelling and argumentation/persuasion exercises. Hence, by incorporating these ideas and activities, the teacher can create a dynamic learning environment that boosts EFL speaking skills in students, assisting them in gaining confidence and fluency in real-life communication.

*Keywords:* speaking skills, creative activities, communicative approach, EFL learners

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## Introduction

No secret will be revealed if stated that the productive skill of speaking is quite challenging since it combines aural comprehension with oral output thus creating a process which, in its turn, promotes marriage between contextual and interactional factors. To put it simply, speaking is a process during which a constant decoding and encoding of information is taking place. If in writing, another productive skill, the writer has time to think about how they can best perform the skill, speaking does not give the speaker the luxury of thinking long. In the classroom, the fear of making mistakes can simply shut down any incentive of speaking. That is why, in order to make the classroom a dynamic environment where learners would feel safe and confident, the teacher needs to understand what problems students have and how these challenges could be addressed.

We often speak about engaging learners in enjoyable and efficient activities. But the simple truth is there is no recipe that would make an activity engaging for everyone. So, what is engagement, first of all? In educational research, student engagement is described as action, energy, active participation, effort, and emotional responsiveness (e.g., Christenson et al., 2012; Reeve, 2012; Skinner et al., 2009). According to Fredricks et al. (2004), the core dimensions of engagement are behavioral (action), cognitive (thinking), and emotional or affective (feeling). This means that knowledge of these dimensions and how they interact with one another can help teachers to design activities specifically for their groups. It also means that students learn better if they are involved in meaningful activities that require thinking and analyzing. In addition, a positive impact on learning is observed if an emotional connection can be built between the learner and the target activity. For example, students can read information in a banner that announces details of an upcoming concert of their beloved band, and discuss how and when they are going to obtain tickets, online or from a box office. In this simple activity, all the dimensions of engagement mentioned above are present.

In addition, a concept that is quite new, task engagement, has emerged. In task performance, behavioral engagement is defined in terms of active participation or time spent on task (Philip & Duchesne, 2016). Gladwell (2011), in his book *Outliers: the story of success*, claims that the time one spends on a task plays a crucial role in success, and he promotes his 10,000 hour-rule. Bonwell and Eisen (1991), define active learning as something that involves students in both doing things and thinking about their actions. As it can be seen, active learning does not merely mean being visibly active. It means doing something and, most importantly, reflecting on it. It is a reciprocal process where cognition and demonstration combine to reinforce key learning points. Eventually, active learning fosters learner engagement, interaction, and deeper understanding.

This article aims to discuss several activities (namely, developing creativity through rap songs, debate-oriented activities and storytelling) that help materialize the concepts briefly addressed above, and come to prove that high results in language learning can be achieved if teachers promote collaborative and interactive learning and employ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions in active learning to reach engagement.

## How to Bridge Engagement and Communicative Activities

One of the activities that seems to echo the requirements of engagement is rap songs. In his *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, Csikszentmihalyi (1990) mentions that when the level of the challenge and the level of the skill of the student are similar, then flow can emerge.

He describes flow as an optimal experience which gives a person “a sense that one’s skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand, in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how well one is performing” (p. 71). In such cases, people do not think about anything else that may be irrelevant to the task at hand. Instead, they find that experience gratifying, just doing it for its own sake. The rap song activity can certainly claim its place among such experiences.

In this activity, each student gets a slip of paper with three unrelated words. They are given only a few seconds to think and create a rap song using all the three words. For example, a student gets a slip of paper with the following words: elephant, purse, ice-cream. They have only 10–15 seconds to think and come up with a rhythmic verse. The choice of the words depends on the level of a given group.

For Example:

An elephant stole, it stole my mother’s purse.

My mother’s purse was gone.

And the ice cream dream was gone.

Many scholars, such as Chesley (2011), Fink (2017), or Lestari (2020) believe that this activity can serve as a good vocabulary revision task. It can also be used to help learners develop their pronunciation, as well as their writing and listening skills.

Building on the engaging, communicative and cognitive benefits discussed above, the approach outlined below places particular emphasis on developing persuasive skills. Activities such as “Kick or Keep It” or “Debate Corner” enhance meaningful language application via the implementation of speaking, listening and discourse skills with high-level cognitive processes, namely collaborative argumentation, decision making and critical thinking. Research in communicative and task-based language teaching suggests that discussion- and debate-oriented activities provide learners with opportunities for purposeful language use, since students need to articulate positions, express viewpoints and respond to alternative perspectives through sustained communication (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004). From a sociocultural angle, such dialogic interaction encourages building shared knowledge as well as cultivating linguistic competence and cognitive skills (Mercer, 2000; Swain, 2005). More than that, the analytical and persuasive nature of debate tasks promotes emotional engagement by inviting learners to present their perspectives and contribute to the outcome of interaction, thus fostering motivation and involvement.

For the “Keep It or Kick It” activity, students are divided into groups of three to four. Each group is provided with a set of cards featuring modern trends and habits (e.g. fast fashion shopping, using AI tools for homework, influencer culture and so on), along with two labeled boxes – “Keep It” or “Kick It”. Each student selects one card and is given approximately two minutes to prepare a brief justification for their decision whether to retain or to discard the trend. They are encouraged to use expressions showing agreement/disagreement, strong adjectives and intensifiers. Depending on the purpose of the lesson, the student level and interests, the teacher may provide helpful language in advance. Students take turns reading their statement aloud, placing it in the corresponding box and expressing their opinion. While they express themselves verbally, the other classmates listen carefully. They can agree, disagree, ask follow up questions and vote on the most compelling arguments, thus enhancing active involvement/participation and critical analysis. Students then proceed to the next round

of the activity, and repeat the process for as long as the teacher and students consider it beneficial to the learning process.

Optionally, the teacher can organize it as a series of mini debates. She divides the whole class into two parties: one party argues for keeping the trend, the other side advocates for kicking it. The duration of the activity and the number of trends to discuss may be adjusted in accordance with the lesson's objectives, instructional structure and the level of student engagement. When the two parties present their viewpoints, the group votes on the most convincing argument. Some samples of contemporary trends and habits to include on the cards can be found below (Teacher-created prompts, 2026):

- Wearing only designer/ branded clothing: style and confidence boost or unnecessary pressure to look expensive?
- Digital detox weekends: does taking a break from screens actually make life better?
- Fast fashion shopping: cheap and trendy or harmful and wasteful?
- Using AI tools for homework: smart support or lazy shortcut?
- Sustainable lifestyle (recycling, reusing, thrifting): saving the planet or just a trend?
- Influencer culture: inspiring creativity or boosting unrealistic lifestyle?
- Reading books on tablets instead of print: eco-friendly convenience or losing the magic of paper?
- Extreme multitasking: productivity boost or brain overload?
- Minimalist lifestyle: living with less happiness or simply fewer possessions?

Leaning on the discussion of persuasive skills, another activity known as “Debate Corner” can be implemented to reinforce these competences. The teacher prepares a set of debatable statements and labels four corners of the room as “strongly agree”, “agree”, “disagree” and “strongly disagree”. She then reads a statement (e.g. “Smartphones should be banned at school”) and students move to a corner that represents their position of agreement. While standing in the corner, students are expected to explain their choice by providing sound argumentation and using persuasive language.

Both activities discussed above serve as powerful active-learning tools that contribute to sustainable practice, enhance meaningful engagement across multiple dimensions, and foster communicative competence, thoughtful reflection and effective persuasion.

Following persuasion-based activities, a storytelling task is introduced to shift students from argumentative discourse to narrative meaning-making. Storytelling has long played a vital role in human communication and learning, thus serving as a powerful tool with the help of which knowledge, values, beliefs and language are transmitted from one generation to another. In educational context, storytelling is broadly acknowledged as a productive pedagogical means that enhances cognitive engagement, linguistic development and student motivation. Bruner (1986) claims that narrative is a central mode of cognitive process through which a person organizes and forms meaning, making stories an effective tool for learning. In language pedagogy, narratives offer students authentic and varied input contextualized in familiar and affectively appealing contexts (Krashen, 1985).

From early childhood, exposure to fairy tales is instrumental for the development of listening skills, narrative awareness and creative thinking. As students mature, their interests seamlessly extend to popular children's literature, young readers' books and young adult fiction which offer linguistically accessible and thought-provoking content. Cameron (2001) highlights that stories create a natural bridge between comprehension and production, allowing learners to

acquire language, while remaining focused on meaning rather than just form. Analogously, Wright (1995) argues that storytelling promotes students' engagement, stimulating prediction, interpretation and emotional engagement.

Leaning on this basis, encouraging learners to re-envision a narrative by modifying its plot, character or resolution can serve as an impactful way to apply storytelling in language learning. Through these activities, learners convey receptive involvement to productive language application, promoting creativity, critical thinking and meaning formation. According to Ellis and Brewster (2014), narrative-oriented writing activities foster more profound language acquisition, as they invite students to experiment with narrative form along with presenting their perspectives. Thus, experimenting with well-known narratives can improve learners' language accuracy as well as cultivate their discourse competence and confidence in writing.

One way of introducing storytelling into the language classroom setting is with the help of 'Plot Twist Challenge' activity. For this activity, the teacher selects familiar narratives, and divides students into groups of three to four. Each group receives a well-known fairy tale, reads the short summary of the original story and together they create a brand new and unexpected ending – creative, funny, sad, failing or surprising. Afterwards, students read their resolutions in class and vote for the best ending. Depending on the purpose and the audience, the implementation of the following narratives could be considered:

- Fairy tales and classic stories: Cinderella, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Beauty and the Beast, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty, The Frog Prince
- Popular Children's/Young Readers' Books: Harry Potter, Alice in Wonderland, The Chronicles of Narnia, Winnie-the-Pooh, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Matilde, The Wizard of Oz
- Young Adult/Modern Favorites: The Hunger Games, The Fault in Our Stars, Twilight, The Book Thief

"A Walk through the forest" (New English File Teacher Book, 2008) is another story-building activity that can be efficiently implemented in the language classroom, as it builds on learners' imaginative engagement and collaborative meaning-making. In this activity, students are divided into pairs and are given a worksheet with prepared scenarios and sets of questions. They actively contribute to the ongoing development of the narrative, events, characters, perspectives in a structured sequence. Participants imagine walking through a forest and describe what they see and feel at each stage. Students need to describe each step below focusing on different descriptive features in detail. For example:

- Forest – sensory impressions and emotions
- House – details of a home and its atmosphere
- Bear – emotional reactions and decisions
- Garden – personal space and symbolism
- Wall – boundaries and the unknown

After completing all the stages, students' descriptions are interpreted symbolically (life, self-image, challenges, personal space, the unknown). The task finishes with reflection and discussion. Sharing personal responses is optional and voluntary. Interpretations are exploratory, not diagnostic, as the aim is insight, not judgement.

Each of these activities enhances creative language application, interaction, negotiation of meaning and building narrative cohesion. Hence, engaging with the story-building offers

meaningful opportunities to exercise linguistic forms in context as well as cultivate discourse-level competence and narrative awareness.

### **Conclusion**

The brief discussion of the communicative activities above supports a simple truth that creativity and engagement can contribute to the development of speaking skills in various educational contexts. By combining creativity with practical speaking activities, the teacher can help students enhance their speaking skills in engaging, enjoyable and effective ways.

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