

Improving your English speaking skills

Are you concerned that your ability to speak in English is not clear enough for listeners to understand what you are saying? You are not alone! When learning a second language, speaking clearly is one of the most difficult challenges you may face. Many non-native speakers find that when it comes to communicating in English, the receptive skills of listening and reading are far easier to generate than the productive skills of speaking and writing. Complicating matters even more is the fact that finding opportunities to speak in English can be problematic while dealing with the daily demands of a full study schedule. This series of Speaking Advice Sheets will not only introduce you to a variety of English speaking opportunities at HKUST, but will also suggest a selection of accessible speaking resources and effective strategies that will help get you started on your ‘speaking in English’ learning journey.

What does ‘speaking’ in English mean?

First let’s take a moment to understand what we actually mean when we talk about ‘speaking’. Experts consider ‘speaking’ to be

“the process of *building and sharing meaning* through the use of *verbal and non-verbal symbols*, in a *variety of contexts*.”¹ Thus the focus of the **Speaking Advice Sheets** will be to target these areas, with English as the medium. You’ll find advice specifically related to ‘building and sharing meaning’ (**S2** and **S3**), using ‘verbal and non-verbal symbols’ (**S4**), and suggestions for interacting verbally in a ‘variety of contexts’ (**S3 – S6**).

What is involved in learning to speak in English?

There are generally considered to be five main aspects to learning to speak in English:

1. Reproducing sounds accurately (**pronunciation**). See our **Pronunciation Advice Sheets** for specific help related to accuracy.
2. Acquiring **vocabulary** (having sufficient vocabulary to express yourself). See our **Vocabulary Advice Sheets** for specific help related to vocabulary building.
3. Speaking clearly (**enunciation**).

4. Speaking articulately (**fluency**)
5. Listening. See our **Listening Advice Sheets** for specific help related to **listening**.

Analyzing your needs – perhaps ‘speaking’ isn’t the problem

A lot of the time learners simply don’t know where to begin. You know you want to improve your spoken English but are not sure how to go about it. In order to make a start you need to have a more specific diagnosis. The questions below will help you identify some typical problem areas and, used in conjunction with the recommendations of an Adviser, can help you decide upon a course for improvement.

Try to answer these questions as honestly and accurately as you can. You’ll notice that problems with speaking can, in fact, be the result of related issues such as: poor listening skills, pronunciation difficulties, lack of appropriate vocabulary, and grammatical errors. If this is the case, you’ll find advice sheets related to these areas in the next leaflet.

- ◆ In conversation, do you have problems following what other people say? If your answer is ‘yes’, you should try using some of the strategies outlined in advice sheet **S3 - Improving your Conversational English**, such as asking for repetition and clarification. You may find the advice sheets **L1 - Improving Your Listening** and **L6 - Listening to Social Conversations** helpful.
- ◆ Do you have a pronunciation problem that sometimes causes confusion in your listeners about what you are saying? For example, are you able to make a distinction between sounds like [l] and [n] and [t] and [d]? Do you stress some syllables in words incorrectly? If yes, check out the advice sheet **P1 - Learning Pronunciation**.
- ◆ Do you hesitate or pause a lot because you lack the vocabulary you need to express yourself in order to participate in a conversation? If so, read the advice sheet **V8 - Learning Vocabulary for Speaking and Writing**.
- ◆ Do people sometimes misunderstand you because your grammar is inaccurate? If yes, check out the advice sheet **G6 - Grammar for Speaking**.

- ◆ How comfortable are you when you speak in English? How easily do the words come out? Are there great pauses and gaps when you speak? If these types of issues are a problem for you then you are likely struggling with fluency. Fluency does not improve at the same rate as other language skills. You can have excellent grammar and still fail to be fluent. If this is your situation then the **Speaking Advice Sheets** are for you.

Yes! I want to work on my English speaking skills!

If you have decided that focusing on speaking in English is what you want to concentrate on, then take a look at the issues below and tick the ones that you think apply to you. Specific advice, strategies, recommendations, and helpful tips in all these areas are provided in the respective **Speaking Advice Sheet**.

- Ideas for practicing speaking (S2)**
- Improving your conversational English (S3)**
- Improving your presentation delivery skills (S4)**
- Improving your interview skills (S5)**
- Speaking English in the workplace (S6)**

And now...

If you would like any help or advice, or just a chat about your progress, please get in touch - **we are here to support your independent learning!** To contact us:

- Make an appointment to see an **adviser**. For details of advisers and their availability, please go to <https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-adviser-timetable/>.
- E-mail your questions to **iLANG** (lcilang@ust.hk).
- Ask at the reception counter of the Language Commons — if the receptionist cannot help you directly, s/he will pass your query on to one of the advisers.

What else can you do?

- Browse the many physical (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/language-commons/#resources>) and online materials (<https://ilang.cle.ust.hk/resources-speaking/>) for Speaking.
- Join a Speaking activity or short course (<http://ilang.cle.ust.hk/speaking/>).
- Join **HKUST Toastmasters** - https://www.facebook.com/groups/HKU_STTMC/ - which meets on a regular basis for members to practice various skills useful in public speaking, including giving prepared as well as

impromptu speeches, listening, and providing each other with feedback.

Last Updated: May 2017

ⁱ Chaney, A.L. and Burk, T.L. 1998. *Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.