

## **How to Encourage Your Students to Speak When Teaching ESP Online**

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines the students’ exposure to online teaching of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) to determine which computer-mediated learning methods, exercises, and practices were considered useful and should continue to be integrated into traditional face-to-face teaching. Since ESP is widely acknowledged to evaluate the needs and interests of students, focusing on combining motivation, subject matter, and content for the teaching of appropriate skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, the role of the teacher would be to design productive and efficient classroom communication skills to encourage them to get actively involved in various communicative tasks even when the teaching process takes place online. When students are given the chance to grasp and master a language within a certain context which is strikingly interesting, relevant, and appealing to them and which can be used and practiced upon in their professional career or future studies, they will be eventually enlarging their vocabulary, becoming increasingly fluent and coherent in their fields, and adapting their linguistic practices to new circumstances or additional roles. In this article, we will explore some relatively low-tech tools and a wide range of straightforward activities to get students to speak/ talk during an ESP lecture. We will also see how working in these ways can help us resolve some of the problems we face when assessing speaking. Apart from highlighting the importance of synchronous computer-mediated communication and of using digital public speaking as a newly-emerging phenomenon, this paper thereupon advances the hypothesis that teaching speaking skills to ESP students should embrace a mingled environment, based on traditional, face-to-face classroom interaction and online technology.*

**Keywords:** *ESP (English for Specific Purposes), low-tech tools, breakout room, chat box, in-class speaking activities, audio recordings, out-of-class speaking activities*

### **Introduction**

Until May 2019, when I visited the International Telematic University UNINETTUNO, Rome, Italy, I had no idea what online teaching meant. Since 2005, when the University was established they have delivered its courses in Internet-based real and virtual spaces, through digitized video lessons, Lvirtual lab, online exercises, tutoring, and interactive classrooms, which take place either synchronically or diachronically, via forums, wikis, and social networks.

The worldwide spreading health crisis and the forced quarantine came as a thunderbolt because we had to rapidly adapt and adjust our teaching to the e-learning environment and the sudden shift to teaching online on a full-time basis was quite challenging. The transition was supposed to be ready at very short notice, so it “is an important consideration when evaluating how the various challenges were met” (Forrester 75).

From the outbreak of the epidemic crisis in March 2020 till the end of the semester in June 2020, the “Ovidius” University of Constanta provided asynchronous online teaching making use of various platforms such as Webex, Moodle, Zoom, Teams, and Google classroom. However, in 2021-2022, we witnessed a slow conversion to synchronous online teaching. In conformity with the epidemiological monthly or weekly accounts, we were compelled to work, adapt, and redesign our activity to either online, hybrid, or face-to-face teaching modes. The courses were taught and delivered in real-time on various online platforms, whereas the seminars were taught face-to-face in small groups at the faculty in compliance with all sanitary measures.

If the paramount objective of foreign language teaching is the remarkable and much appreciated acquisition of communicative language competence, according to CEFRLTE (Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning, Teaching, and Evaluation), it goes without saying that when teaching ESP, beyond the specificity, we should teach “the literacy skills which are appropriate to the purposes and understandings of particular communities” (Hyland 386).

Because the use of the English language has widely spread due to liberalization, privatization, and globalization, the most significant goal of learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP) would be to acquire a set of professional skills to accomplish and satisfy specific job-related functions or tasks. For these clearly stated reasons, ESP courses should focus on determining the purposes, wants, and needs, as well as the functions for which English is requested, utilizing a needs analysis. Since ESP is widely acknowledged as a learner-centered approach, its major goal is to accomplish the precisely specified needs of target learners to meet their professional or vocational requirements.

The advantages of learning ESP would be a faster acquisition of required linguistic items, vocabulary, and specific skills, learning efficiency, and effectiveness to master the language properly and accurately in job-related tasks. Since students will need to interact with their peers and communicate effectively in their professional, vocational fields, an ESP course should incorporate pair and group work activities focusing on problem-solving tasks, compulsory usage of the target language in and outside the class, efficient,

productive and introductory class presentations, telephone conversations, instructions, dialogues, and procedures description.

In addition to the disciplinary peculiarity, when teaching ESP online it does not mean we have to omit cultivating productive skills such as speaking and writing at the expense of receptive skills like reading and listening. For instance, when using an online learning platform, enhancing or refining speaking skills is enabled entirely via online speaking activities such as getting engaged in online class discussions, asking and answering questions, giving oral presentations to be held individually or in small groups, performing in informal daily life situations, carrying out discussions in a seminar, conference, or a meeting situation, speaking in a job interview situation, speaking in professional related situations such as describing your jobs, future careers, coordinating, cooperating, and communicating with colleagues and potential clients or customers. Even if they lack confidence and find it awkward, troublesome, or uncomfortable to express themselves and get engaged in classroom discussions without seeing their peers face-to-face, we should not feel discouraged from the very beginning because synchronous online teaching, up to the present time, gives rise to an unforgettable challenge for both teachers and the students.

All speaking sub-skills, including “speaking in the seminars” even if it is generally acknowledged as a job-related, rather than an academic skill, can be practiced within a digital learning environment, focusing on comprehensibility or conveying the message, using appropriate academic and non-academic vocabulary as well as on fluency and grammatical accuracy while speaking.

The existence of numerous learning materials and the exploitation of video content such as thematically-related dialogues, excerpts from lectures, interviews, scholastic video clips, and films uploaded to the learning platforms turned out to be extremely useful and enjoyable during synchronous online classes.

### **Literature review**

Scholars unanimously agree that ESP teachers should focus on developing productive language skills, on boosting their technical terminology or jargon, instead of teaching grammar rules, because a future civil or mechanical engineer will have to use the language both accurately and fluently for communicative purposes in their professional life, regardless of the teaching mode, be it online or traditional classroom.

According to Hashemi and Azizinezhad (51), synchronous computer-mediated communication “offers superior chances for interaction and

improvement to students in an EFL setting where native speakers are few and far between”.

During the ‘emergency remote teaching’ (see Bridges 2020) and according to Linardopoulos (199) since speaking skills are regarded as a mandatory professional requirement within the ESP syllabus “effective public speaking and interpersonal communication skills are considered by many human resources managers to be essential for prospective employees”.

One way of fostering communicative competence through networked multimedia is by means of videoconferencing which was defined as “synchronous audio and video communication through computer and telephone networks between two or more geographically dispersed sites” (Lawson, Comber, Gage & Cullum-Hanshaw 295).

Using videoconferencing as a teaching tool, we could help our learners improve their speaking skills and communicative competence, and moreover, they could be trained in mastering a tool that they will eventually implement and apply in the workplace. As part of the synchronous communication and teaching methods “videoconferencing, can be employed as an alternative to face-to-face interaction to provide additional out-of-class speaking practice, thereby facilitating engagement among learners” (Vurdién 269). For this very reason, even if we have returned to the face-to-face teaching method, we should retain and exploit the benefits of videoconferencing in the ESP syllabus.

The scholarly and educational involvement of videoconferencing in the process of language teaching and learning has been examined in various academic papers such as Wang 2004, 2006 & 2007, Lee 2007, and Jauregui & Bañados 2008, to name just a few. According to Vurdién, “synchronous computer-mediated communication has been perceived as a convenient means of facilitating speaking skills acquisition and development of students’ communicative competence” (273), as is also confirmed by other researchers (see Jauregi, de Graaff, van den Bergh Milan 2012, Kervin and Derewianka 2011, Levy and Stockwell 2006), as well as desire, eagerness and enthusiasm to communicate (see Freiermuth and Jarrell 2006, Macintyre 2007), but also attenuation, even fading of anxiety (see Bueno-Alastuey 2011, Satar and Ozdener 2008) and adjusted production (see Bueno-Alastuey 2013).

### **Findings and results**

The major question that pops into my mind as an ESP teacher and which I consider a struggle is: Have you found it difficult to get your students to speak/talk while in online classes?

Getting students to speak can be difficult even at the best of times, and the challenges seem to increase when teaching ESP online or remotely.

However, it need not be so difficult. What we need to do is make some adaptations to our regular activities and use simple digital resources that might work in our favour.

Throughout the pandemic, we were forced to work with so many startling online learning tools, such as Webex, Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Skype, Moodle, and so on. Among them, Webex, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams were some of the most well-received and used educational online platforms since they offered and supported synchronous learning activities as well as the communication needs of people anywhere and anytime without the need to meet physically. These online tools are endowed with several useful characteristics, such as breakout room meetings and recordings. By making use of them, students are given the opportunity to accomplish a task privately in small working groups and record their performance. Thus, breakout rooms and recordings can be employed for practicing and strengthening both speaking and listening skills similar to face-to-face classroom interactions.

We are told that we should get our students to talk as much as possible inside the classroom. But how do we do this? Are there any methods? There are so many questions to address. For example: What rules of speaking engagement can you establish to ensure equal and appropriate conversation? How can you encourage a few students, especially absolutely self-conscious teenagers to speak when they never do so? How do you get students to stop speaking to each other in their mother tongue?

It is never going to be completely equal because of the students in the classroom, but I think the main goal is to get more and more students to speak. Things like nominating the next speaker/ reader (if you have been nominated once, you cannot be nominated again), could be done in the breakout rooms, as well, but with as much participation as possible. By trying not to force them to do too much and by switching the speaking out-loud activity to the chat box, very shy students will benefit because even using chat is a step forward in the right direction.

As for the use of the mother tongue, the suggestion would be to listen to the kinds of phrases they frequently need, model those phrases for them, and illicit next class. They are not going to say it or use the phrase from the very beginning but little by little supply them with the language they need. You should not be disappointed if you hear them talk in their mother tongue. If students use their mother tongue it is great, it means they have something to express. Just give them those bits of language.

The first step away from “I find myself talking more than my students during the ESP lesson” would be to start building your students’ confidence which is not necessarily easy sometimes as there are many different factors

that might affect their communicativeness. But we can empower them and pass some of the roles to the students that can help them take part in the class and talk more. Another thing we need to do is give students a reason to interact and talk to each other, which is mainly related to the notion of task-design. Five different modes of teaching or working might help you improve your students' ability to speak while online: the chat box, the in-class speaking activities, breakout rooms, audio recordings, and out-of-class speaking activities.

The **chat box**, even if it is not considered speaking, is parallel to speaking and students can use writing as a substitute for speaking. It can be used in the face-to-face classroom for students who still find it too difficult to speak without first having a little time to think, and also as a way of switching students' attention away from being too preoccupied with accuracy and concentrating more on efficient and successful communication. My students really enjoy this type of activity, especially because they are 'allowed' to write notes in class. Differently stated: do you give your students time to do some writing in preparation for speaking? This means scaffolding, helping them go through. It is not actual speaking, but it gets students engaged. For instance: We can adapt the face-to-face material by numbering the activities differently for the online interaction to work. For starting, we can use the one-finger response technique.

Example:

In which picture can you see a scaffolding, a floating crane, and a bulk-handling crane?



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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Floating\\_crane\\_off\\_Kuwait.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Floating_crane_off_Kuwait.jpg)

All they have to do is to type the number. That is not speaking. But we can shift the focus and practice 30 teachers – one student activity. I want you to type a question and ask me something related to the pictures or topic. Questions are an important part of any lecture, whether you are standing in front of your class, or in a webinar. They improve learning and boost

engagement. The best way to get them to type is to explicitly tell them to. Ask a question, then say “I’ll leave you a few seconds to put your answers in chat.” They will be more likely to chat if they know you expect it. Instead of asking a yes/no question, turn it into something open-ended that requires your students to think about an answer. They will find better responses that sooner or later will revive or stimulate more discussion. Here are some of the questions received:

1. When was the first time you climbed on a scaffolding?
2. Have you ever been on a floating crane? If yes, what was the occasion?
3. Can you handle a bulk crane? Which was the heaviest thing you lifted with the bulk crane?

You can do this with any piece of language. What happens actually: the students who are not as proficient produce sentences using the structures, and the vocabulary you are giving them. Step by step students come up and start to use other language, they go beyond the language and start asking other stuff. And that is how a conversation starts. It is very important to respond to what your students are writing, and show them that you are paying attention.

In professional settings or when teaching ESP, there are times during a lecture when students might have something extremely important to add that might boost what is being said at the moment, and rather than drawing the entire attention to themselves, he or she would rather just share it through the chat box possibly by using a hyperlink or an attachment. Or times, when they might have something to show that even controverts what is being said at that time.

Here are some suggested activities you can apply in case you are asking your students to watch a film-adapted novel you are browsing through in class or take part in a seminar conducted on the internet on Drilling and Sampling. You will notice that students are going to be more able to listen and understand what they are seeing/hearing if you come up with clear-cut, well focused questions to allow them to debate or exchange views via online chat while the film is still playing. Assuming that students will require more time or, for technical reasons, you will not be able to play the video within the multimedia lab, ask them to take short notes while watching and then do a web chat the subsequent day. You can split the class into several distinct discussion groups and give group members more or equal chances to get involved in. Or, you could entrust separate groups with certain, particular focus questions.

With all that in mind, here are two activities I have designed for my second-year Civil Engineering students after watching a ten-minute film

about Drilling and Sampling. After viewing the material, they were supposed to mark the following statements as true (T) or false (F) (Ionițiu 46):

“6.1. a. There are three basic drilling techniques.

b. The rotary wash boring method can be performed with or without casing.

c. The hollow stem auger is used when there is no caving or squeezing.

d. When dealing with clay or sand soil use the solid stem auger-open hole method.

6.2. a. What is an auger?

b. When is the hollow stem auger method used?

c. What is the purpose of drilling? “

The answers were supplied either in the chat box or in the microphone.

In conclusion, the chat box will give you the possibility to turn any speaking activities into writing activities, it should be open and free by giving the students the chance to produce and say things even if it does not make sense to us, as we should be focusing on fluency rather than accuracy. Do not inhibit your students by making them feel bad if they have typed something wrong and, last but not least, if it is student-generated it is much more interesting.

For the **in-class speaking** activities, here are some suggestions:

The best classes, in my opinion, are those in which the teacher is chatting with the students about anything for five minutes at the beginning of the class. We all know that students are full of ideas and, as a teacher, you are a mystery to them. One thing you can allow them to do is to interview the teacher. Remember that you are in control if you find the question rude or inappropriate. It is a very simple way to empower your students, a warm-up activity that does not need to be necessarily linked to the topic. If the students are too shy, you can use the chat box instead of the microphone.

Another activity is: nominate the next speaker or reader, in case you want to practice reading aloud. Here is an idea: if you have a volunteer, you can ask him to read the first sentence of the given text. Then they stop and nominate another student to read the next sentence and so on and so forth. There are certain benefits of this type of activity: it makes all the students pay attention because they do not know who is going to be nominated next and it is a zero preparation activity since the students are doing all the work: they are reading through the text, speaking, you just sit back and observe. In case of mispronunciation, you can give feedback later.

Another type of activity is: show and tell. For instance, in each lesson you can have a small section in which one student will show you on the camera an object and tell a few things about it. You can practice certain bits



of language or vocabulary, you can supply them with the language they need and build on more and more and encourage students to ask further questions, which is another way of empowering students.

Finally, when you finish your class you have to use exit statements. It could be: tell me your favourite word from today's class. What was your favourite phrase from the class? What did you learn in today's class? Ask me a question before you leave the classroom. What is the next thing you will want to learn about more? Every student will open his/her microphone and say a few words. It becomes like a closing routine. Everybody has to say something before they leave.

So, the in-class speaking activity needs to be balanced. It is not like you are doing all the speaking. Make sure you are getting your students to speak as much as possible since this is a student-centered and student-controlled activity. Try not to worry too much about accuracy, work on fluency first.

Let's move on to **breakout rooms** which are an incredibly powerful thing if it works in your particular virtual class/ platform as it simulates the group or pair-work activities that we do in our regular face-to-face class. Videoconferencing programs or software such as Microsoft Teams, Webex, or Zoom have this function and teachers can break away from the main lecture room, into separate rooms, for other activities or for separate discussions. The breakout room and recording characteristics are some of the preferred ones enabling students to practice and boost their speaking skills and communicative competencies, and can be used for a variety of activities, from short or long assignments to group projects. These breakout rooms permit a more controlled manner of conducting conversations with smaller groups of students, detached from the rest of the class. This way, in smaller groups of three and up to six, the students are reassured and more confident to interact with each other without being afraid or intimidated, which may be the case in larger groups. Students' reaction to using this technique was upstanding and compelling since it can help them improve their speaking skills.

When using the breakout rooms we need to set clear tasks and objectives. We need to make sure that students know exactly what to do and check our instructions carefully by writing them on the screen so that students can actually see what they have to do. Don't forget to set realistic time limits. In the end, breakout room activities are a great way to diversify class assignments, ensure learning is student-centered, and give students invaluable speaking time. When using breakout rooms, teachers are also given the opportunity to observe and assess student progress from a distance and put into practice individual teaching methods for each group.

I mainly used them to have my students discuss a problem and agree on a solution. This is an amazing way to not only enhance students' problem-solving skills but also their joint effort and teamwork abilities. After splitting my students into 3 groups/ breakout rooms, they were given five to seven minutes to solve their task (Ionițiu 40)

“a. What equipment will you use for site investigation?

b. Name some familiar soil types you might encounter while investigating the building site.

c. What surveying method do you know?”

As your students are figuring out the solution, it is important for teachers to be on hand to help with any challenges. I recommend you finish off the class with a feedback session, where each group shares their problem-solving approach or reflects on what they have learned.

For the TikTok generation, in my opinion, **audio or video recordings** are vastly underused in English language teaching, but since many of us have been thrown into working more with digital tools (for instance Vocaroo, Flipgrid or Padlet), you can ask students to record themselves, listen to each other's recordings, and, by asking them which one they prefer, they will have to listen and pay more attention because obviously, they will want theirs to be the best. So, audio recordings could range from extremely controlled to being free. They will be able to watch their videos back, identify their errors, and respond to each other from their own homes.

For example, you can use Padlet to fathom what your ESP students heretofore know about the concept/ topic/ area you are about to teach. What former, precursory information or knowledge do your students possess or learn thoroughly about that particular topic and what don't they know? Students merely post and share their knowledge on Padlet, which might help you sketch a few ideas to design your lesson. Or you can ask your students to say the vocabulary words from today's lesson.

Videoconferencing can be another additional helping tool for students outside the classroom setting because it enables online interaction and triggers the improvement and strengthening of speaking skills.

Accordingly, students are given the chance to get involved in genuine interactions and work on how to figure out the meaning and become skillful and proficient in various ways of publicly displaying and communicating their ideas/ beliefs/ views as there is a shift from learning a language to actually using it (see Alshahrani 2016).

### **Out-of-class speaking activities.**

I keep hearing my students complaining: ‘I've got nobody to practice my English with.’ As long as you have a phone and a good internet connection

you can say things into it. With tools like Whatsapp or Viber, which can be used completely out of class, it is student-to-student, it is not monitored by the teacher, and they can interview each other. It could be done individually or it could be shared. So, in other words, this type of activity could be individual or collaborative, and it can easily involve self-assessment (you record it, you listen to it, and if you consider it good enough you post it, you send it, if it is not, record it again). Since it is student-centered it typically gets more engaging.

The purpose is to give the participants the chance to interact and chat/communicate/ debate outside the classroom walls with their friends and colleagues, which eventually may prove extremely constructive and efficient since they knew each other and would not experience embarrassment, lack of confidence, or hesitation when communicating their opinions.

### **Conclusions**

The goal of this paper was to examine the most popular methods of teaching ESP in the context of emergency remote teaching and learning, with the purpose of encouraging speaking. In compliance with the results and findings of this paper, during face-to-face classroom interaction, the most common activities focus on exploiting practices like dialogue, sharing, role-play, lectures, and doing exercises to assist and support learners in acquiring the language, within emergency synchronous or asynchronous remote teaching the chat box, breakout room, audio and video recording, and in or out-of-the class speaking activities would be the best methods of improving our students' speaking and listening skills.

Regardless of the mode of teaching, whether online or face-to-face, we should find the right tools and techniques to help us teach effectively, overcome and explore the challenges of online teaching and improve confidence with digital teaching, and get ready-to-go activities to help engage our ESP students.

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