

## **Practicing Speaking Skills in the ESP Context to Prepare Students for Their Careers**

Ionela IONIȚIU  
Ovidius University of Constanța

**Abstract:** *The purpose of this paper is to provide solutions for the improvement and strengthening of the oral communication skills (conversations) of Ovidius University students. Worldwide globalization demands people to become skilled in English in all its aspects, whether it is reading, speaking, writing, or listening. With the rapid advancement of modern, developing, digital technologies such as the internet or the social media platforms, English has been playing a crucial part, being the most widespread language spoken in the whole world. Since the prominence of English language is worldwide acknowledged and cannot be unexploited and discarded, we have tried to establish the role of the teacher in order to improve the learners' skills, to outline the features of oral communication that need to be improved and the strategies which can be used to overcome the difficulties. This study also exploits some of the most relevant solutions to deal with the weakness, reluctance, and deficiencies in speaking skills, such as rehearsing speaking English inside and outside the classroom successfully, using the social media platforms to effectively communicate in English and to reveal the students' feelings and needs.*

**Keywords:** *speaking; ESP; EAP; comprehensible output; Point Evidence Analysis (PEA); Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to provide some answers to questions related to speaking skills in general. Firstly, we will try to provide answers to the following questions: Why are ESP students reluctant to speaking? Why is speaking so important compared to reading, writing, or listening? How can we provide practice and little changes in classroom management activities? How can lectures be connected to the most popular English proficiency tests available on the market that our students might need one day throughout their professional lives? Teachers might not prepare or train them overtly for the testing itself, but the things we do in the classroom, or the activities embedded within an ESP lecture can borrow ideas from these tests.

In a world more globalized than ever before – which is still disturbed by issues such as the pandemic or political conflicts and warfare, and which is dominated by insecurity, lack of confidence, and competition – the way we

provide and supply facts, information, and skills to our students by means of education and learning should be given a new and improved form, structure, and appearance.

Standing in front of an audience and addressing a message, a statement, a speech, or a lecture is one of people's ultimate worries. For many ESP language students chiefly, this is the endmost provocation, even though speaking is unconditionally considered a highly required skill at work. Since most of us are experiencing anxiety, unease, fear, and even nervousness whenever we deliver a speech, speaking at a public gathering, or presenting a lecture, we also need to consider and pay attention to gesture and stance, visual assets and training, to assist our ESP students in this globetrotting to meet this twofold challenge – speaking in public in a foreign language.

### **Literature review**

In spite of the significance of communication skills over the years, the teaching of speaking skills has been neglected and disregarded because most EFL, ESL and ESP teachers have been teaching speaking skills by practicing and focusing on memorizing dialogues, repeating drills or exercises, and reciting memorized textbook dialogues. Refining and boosting the students' speaking skills, however, require more than that because it entails a lot of classroom practice, training, and intellectual stimulation for both speaking and other various activities.

ESP students are, above all, communicators able to exchange information, news, ideas, opinions, or thoughts on a given topic. They are deliberately engaged in negotiating meaning—in exerting themselves to understand each other—even when their target language knowledge is far from being complete or comprehensive. Additionally, whereas the teacher's part is less prevailing and assertive than in a teacher-centered approach, students are considered as more liable for their own learning.

Even so, today's twenty-first-century society insists on the noteworthiness of improving and reinforcing learners' speaking skills which will give them the opportunity to apply for a well-paid job and establish well in their professional career. Scholars such as Bailey (2005) and Goh (2007) have advanced methods and techniques to improve and strengthen speaking skills via syllabus design, teaching principles, and speaking assessment and strongly believed that being able to communicate entailed more than linguistic competence; it required communicative competence (Hymes 1971) — knowing when and how to say what to whom. Such comments and

remarks brought a radical change in the field in the late 1970s and early 1980s which meant a shift from a linguistic structure-centered approach to a Communicative Approach (Widdowson 1990; Savignon 1997). Differently stated, the course is no longer just about skillfully and efficiently using linguistic forms, because the emphasis is on the communication process based on real-life language use.

Chaney considers that “speaking is the process of building and sharing meaning through the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols in a variety of contexts” (Chaney 13). We share Celce-Murcia and Olshtain’s opinions who emphasize that,

in some ways speaking can be considered the most difficult skill to acquire as it requires command of speech production sub-skills like vocabulary retrieval, choice of grammatical patterns, and sociocultural competence. (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 165)

Likewise, other researchers such as Anne Lazaraton propose that oral communication encompasses four main competences: grammatical competence, dealing with phonology, vocabulary, word and sentence formation; sociolinguistic competence, focusing on rules for interaction, social meanings; discourse competence, namely cohesion or how sentences are bound together; and last but not least, strategic competence or compensatory strategies to use in difficult, complicated situations (Lazaraton 104). As stated by Lazaraton, learners should enhance all these skills to gain a high communicative English level, yet in the last few years, with the rise of the communicative approach, more significance is appointed to fluency, striving to reach a balance with the conventional, conservative accuracy. Iqbal outlines that “Speaking, therefore, as a skill is defined as the oral mode or the productive skill which is more complicated and which involves more than just pronouncing words” (Iqbal).

### **Speaking skills in ESP settings**

So, why are students reluctant to speaking during an ESP lecture? The possible answers received from both teachers and students and which can apply to ESP and EAP as well are: 1. Bullying from classmates if they make mistakes. We have witnessed so many times awkward scenes in which students refused to speak because their colleagues laughed or mocked them either because of the pronunciation or grammatical mistakes. 2. Maybe they think their speaking skills are not very well-developed so they are afraid that

the others will mock them; 3. Lack of practice from previous years as they are not used at all to speaking about an ESP topic; 4. They are shy which could be termed as lack of confidence. Sometimes trying to speak in front of others can be frustrating, but in order to overcome their lack of confidence and to deliver speeches in a foreign language, teachers must provide a secure, welcoming, and friendly learning environment in which students are encouraged to get rid of this feeling of insecurity caused by previous experiences where one was either ridiculed for their speaking abilities or felt inferior. Teachers should encourage their students to share their fears because getting better or improving their speaking skills can be an asset. 5. They do not want to say anything which could be labelled as lack of motivation or interest in speaking and listening to what others are saying; 6. They cannot be bothered, as they would rather be anywhere else, but not in the classroom; 7. It feels unnatural and it is sometimes quite difficult when teachers work with a group of people who all speak Romanian, and then s/he asks them to speak to each other in English; 8. They do not have any ideas about the topic as they cannot give an answer even in their own mother language. Not a few times teachers were faced with situations where the students knew nothing about a topic of current relevance for their future career. Therefore, teachers should be creative and turn the situation into an interesting content, an inspiring challenge for his/her students. 9. They feel no one is listening. Something that teachers have noticed during their lectures is that students tend to speak to the teacher rather than to each other and even when they try to speak to each other there are very few doing this.

But how would teachers signal to their students that they are actually listening to them? What would their behavior include? They should listen actively. Nodding and shaking their head might help, showing their speaker that they understand, and they actually listen to them. Maintaining eye contact is also really important. You can tell by someone's facial expression that they are listening if they raise their eyebrows. Using “eerhers” and “arhums” or even continuing or contributing either by stating a few words like” I agree, yes” or by asking follow-up questions, to be involved in the active listening process.

Why is, after all, speaking so important? The possible answers could be grouped into:

1. It shows comprehension. When students speak it means they have understood and processed the language and they can use it, which gives a clear idea of what they can and cannot do in English. It goes without saying, that one gets the clearest idea from speaking, much more than from reading,

listening or writing because speaking is an immediate and clear feedback of what they have learnt.

2. English, and more precisely ESP, is more than a school subject. It is a tool that students will use outside the school environment. The learning environment is to encourage achievement of purpose such as booking or going on a holiday abroad or when applying for a well-paid job within an international company. To put it differently, English is a tool to get things done internationally. It is not just about passing an exam at the end of the term.

3. But there is actually another significant argument that shows that speaking is a key part of the learning process because it works well to help students learn. Teachers give students input, they give them a listening or a reading task to perform, and then they teach them grammar rules or some specific vocabulary which means they are putting in some input.

Merril Swain argues not just for the input, but also for comprehensible output which

pushes learners to process language more deeply – with more mental effort – than does input. With output, the learner is in control. In speaking or writing, learners can stretch their interlanguage to meet communicative goals. (Swain 99)

This means that they have to try and get their message across, it shows what they do not know and what they need to know, but it also makes them process the language and then create sentences, conversations, responses or reactions. Thus, comprehensible output actually encourages students to speak by internalizing the language even more. Teachers might fall into the trap of thinking that giving them the language is enough, but it is not. Actually, getting them to use the respective language shows them what they are missing, pushing them a little bit further.

Nevertheless, are there ways to encourage that in the classroom? Obviously, there are. Teachers should model good behavior or habits, by showing students that s/he is listening, that s/he is actively involved in the speaking/ listening process, by encouraging them to talk to the classroom among themselves and not to the teacher, and most importantly by not forgetting to praise all the attempts. Teachers should also bear in mind that when a student addresses the class, s/he talks to all his/her peers, not just to the teacher and that is why teachers should try to encourage that so that they feel that everybody is on their side. For instance, when a student says or asks

a question, instead of answering directly, teachers should get more students engaged in the activity by raising another question such as: “What do you think about this topic/ issue?” This is one possible way of encouraging students to address each other rather than addressing the teacher.

Another way to develop good habits and behavior during a speaking activity is to think in terms of PEA, which means point, example, and analysis. Thus, a good way to think about speaking is to make a point, give an example and then analyze it.

Furthermore, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson claim that “language develops in context of functional use” (153), and teachers should “create situations in which all their students use language for a variety of purposes and with a variety of people” (as cited by McCafferty et al., 21). From this excerpt, we can come to the conclusion that carrying out a group work activity in the classroom enhances and improves the learner-learner ongoing interaction because group work provides learners with chances, circumstances, and golden opportunities to speak with each other, share ideas, give suggestions or advice and so on. Asking students to work in small groups of 3 or 4 increases the amount of communicative practice they get. Thus, it is our entire responsibility as teachers to prepare, instruct, and coach our learners how to speak, intercommunicate, and act by training them systematically and purposefully. Differently stated, the teacher acts as a facilitator, a true educator in planning and arranging communicative activities and as an advisor during the activities. One of the teacher’s most significant duties is to set up a set of circumstances or situations liable to stimulate, encourage, and support communication. Communicative exchange and interaction consolidate cooperative relationships among students. It also provides our students with the chance to work on negotiating meaning.

In terms of ESP, English teachers need to educate their learners in speaking skills in addition to the standard curriculum, whereas the learners have to pay particular attention to speaking skills to expose themselves as much as possible to the language and to various communication situations. According to Sielaff and Washburn

the PEA strategy was designed to encompass the notion that a well-crafted argumentative response, whether a paragraph or multiparagraph essay, contains clear points (P) or claims related to a specific position or stance that are supported with evidence (E) and followed by further explanation or analysis (A). The PEA mnemonic was designed to be flexible enough for students to use the strategy

across content areas (i.e., ELA and Science). (Sielaff and Washburn 179)

and, in our opinion, should be linked with the CEFRL standards.

### **How to Teach Speaking Skills in an ESP course**

Here is an example of a speaking activity developed focusing on PEA.

*Speaking activity 1. Let us talk about architecture. Talk to a partner about your favorite architectural style.*

The most basic, straightforward answer received during the ESP lecture was that: **Point:** neo-Romanian architecture. **Example/Evidence:** Neo-Romanian architecture is famous for its porches and arches. **Analysis:** I like it because it is a way of expressing our national identity against the relentless attacks of the Ottoman Empire or other foreign influences or trends.

To spice up the speaking activity a little bit, teachers should encourage learners to get engaged into the conversation, and boost their creativity, therefore we have designed additional helping questions:

What is your favorite architectural style? And your least favorite?

How does architecture affect the environment?

Do people in your country/ area/ neighborhood complain about architectural styles?

What kind of architectural styles can you find in your area/region/country?

What was the most beautiful/ interesting/ weird building you have ever seen? Why?

Have you, or someone you know, ever been

a). involved in refurbishing an old building?

b). interested in reconditioning a famous cathedral/ museum/ hospital/ church?

c). wondering how were the pyramids/ Notre Dame/ Pisa Tower designed/ built?

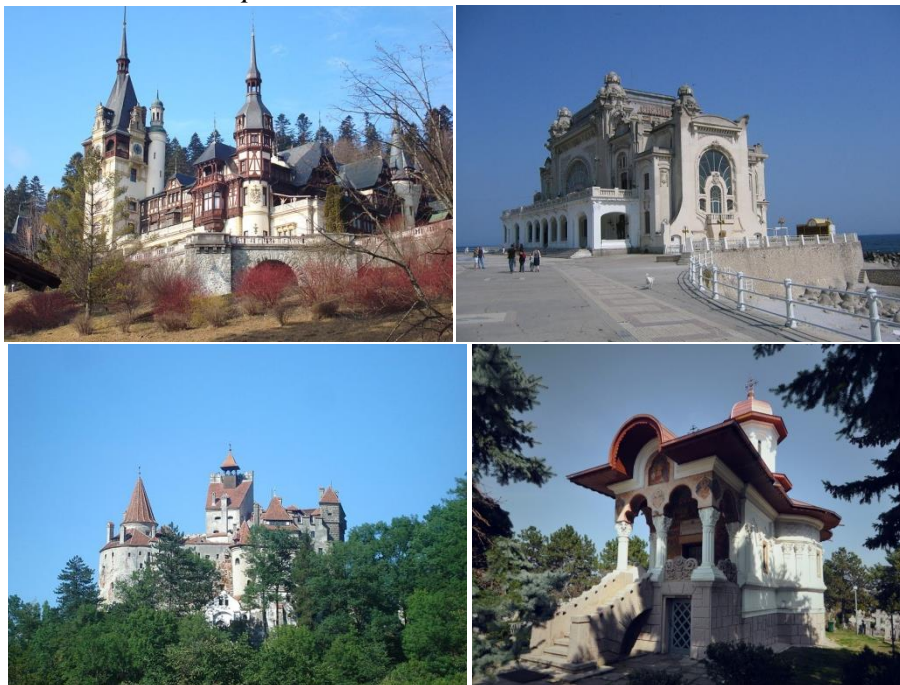
Another way to improve and refine speaking abilities is by using pictures. Here is what you can do:

- Give each student a picture and ask them to describe it for at least one minute to their partners.
- Can you write some questions about the pictures? Ask them to work in groups and write five questions about the picture, then swap pictures with another group.

- Try to answer the questions.

*Speaking activity 2. You are going to give a talk about different places to visit in Romania for the travelling architect. Choose two pictures. Tell the class about the advantages and disadvantages of living/travelling in those places/homes. You are given 1 minute to think about the topic and at least 2 minutes to talk about it.*

*Speaking activity 3. Your English teacher is planning an activity for the newly arrived Erasmus students to get to know each other and learn about our culture, architecture and civilization. He is asking for your help and support. Chose two pictures. Share with your classmates technical/ historical information about the pictures.*



*(see Works Cited for image reference)*

To sum it up, thinking PEA when speaking helps students provide a much more comprehensive, much more extensive, and much more enjoyable answer.

Asking them questions could also work, but not questions like *Why...?*, because this is quite a difficult question to handle. Instead you can use a more friendly, more likely suitable question such as: *What is the reason for...? or Could you give me an example of...?* This is how we can



help our students to expand what they can say. Differently stated, if we are preparing our students for an English language exam such as TEOFL, Cambridge, or IELTS, then the students cannot just provide a simple one or two-word answer because this will not work within an English exam as all the speaking tasks should last at least one minute and focus on PEA.

### **Daily questions**

Everyday celebrates something. Let us assume or imagine that today we are celebrating the engineer's/ architect's day. What questions could you ask for those?

*Did you know that today is...? What was your favourite job when you were a child?*

Start the day with a daily question, instead of the register. This means you will get to know a little bit more about your students by building a community because the more you know about your students, the more interested they will get into knowing each other. Remember that most English exams quite often at the beginning of the speaking activities focus on extracting personal information. Apply daily questions to the exam. For instance, tell them that you are going to ask them questions about architecture.

*Question 1: What do like about your city in terms of buildings or architecture?*

The answers received were surprisingly interesting:

Student 1: I come from a small town, as I was born in Tulcea. We cannot talk about architecture there, as there are only communist blocks. The only important buildings in the town, in my opinion, are probably the Art Museum, a famous building from the time of the Ottoman occupation, and the Avramide House or the House of Collections, built at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and belonged to a famous Greek merchant.

Student 2: I was born in a small village, so I cannot say too much about the architecture of my birthplace, but I could say a few words about the last place I have visited while on holiday. We went to Sinaia and we enjoyed so much visiting the Peleş and Pelișor Castles, an architectural ensemble created by King Carol I and built in the German Neo-Renaissance style. I like it because it is well preserved and I could learn interesting things about our national history.

Student 3: I am not going to talk about architecture because I am not an expert in the field. I would prefer to talk about the building materials used in my birth area for the construction of the houses. If you had ever been to

Jurilovka which is a traditional Ukrainian fishing village, you would have definitely noticed the small, sun-dried brick, thatched-roofed houses, painted in blue which are extremely cozy and welcoming.

*Question 2: What can you do to change or improve the old center of the city?*

Student 1: At this point, nothing much because I lack the power and the money to do something.

Student 2: If I were the Mayor, I would apply for projects financed by the European Union and I would try to restore as many historical buildings that are about to collapse as possible, such as Casa cu lei from the old city, built by an Armenian merchant and which is now in ruin.

Student 3: I come from a city where the Mayor has done a lot with the European funds. Apart from changing the sewage system and paving the streets, he managed to restore so many nationally important buildings. If you visit Oradea, you should not miss the Moon Church and Oradea Fortress.

*Question 3: Which parts/ buildings of your city would you like to show to tourists or advertise on the social media?*

Student 1: If you google Brasov county and the things to do in the area, what pops in first is the Black Church or the Bran Castle. But these are not the only things Brasov is famous for. People should enjoy the medieval architecture of the county and visit less advertised fortresses such as Rupea or Făgăraș.

Student 2: Much less advertised than Brasov county, in my opinion, is the Danube Delta. I haven't seen any advertisement with the Danube Delta either on TV or through social media. People are not encouraged to visit it. I only saw negative ads related to the high prices in the Mamaia resort which explains why the resort was quite empty in mid-summer.

Student 3: But Why would anyone go to Mamaia, when you can go to Greece or Turkey where prices are lower and the hotel services are much better and more sophisticated than in Romania. I do love my country, but we can only advertise something if that thing or place is worth visiting, otherwise we would be blamed for false/ fake advertising.

The point of the exercise is to turn everything into a speaking activity. For instance, students are given a reading excerpt from a newspaper/ magazine/ TV newscast and asked to answer the following questions: *How does this situation make you feel? Do you feel angry?*

“The sight of newly constructed apartments collapsing in the earthquakes that hit Turkey has sparked anger. Two major earthquakes - measuring 7.8 and 7.5 on the magnitude scale - flattened buildings of all kinds and killed thousands of people across southern Turkey and northern Syria.

But the fact that even some of the newest apartment blocks crumbled to dust has led to urgent questions about building safety standards.

Modern construction techniques should mean buildings can withstand quakes of this magnitude. And regulations following previous disasters in the country were supposed to ensure these protections were built in.” (Horton and Armstrong )

As a follow-up activity or homework you could ask them to imagine that they are civil engineers living in Turkey in that precise affected area. What would you do? Send me a voicemail or a voice note explaining the steps or the activities you will get involved in.

**How would xxx answer?** Who is an inspirational architect in your life? Which historical building would you like to rehabilitate one day?

How would the person you chose answer these questions? Tell a partner. Explain why?

Do you prefer...?

- building residential constructions?
- building commercial constructions?
- renovating/ refurbishing old buildings?
- demolishing old buildings and erecting skyscrapers?
- preserving the architectural style?
- building in a unique, innovative style, regardless of the architectural style of the area?

How can we provide as much practice as possible?

Since most of our ESP students are searching and applying for well-paid civil engineering jobs worldwide, linking our speaking activities with the TEOFL, Cambridge or any other English test would most definitely improve their speaking skills and raise their chances of getting that particular job. Therefore, as a teacher you should focus on practicing and preparing your students for interviews, voicemails, talks and follow-up questions. For instance, tell them that during the eight-question interviews, you will be assessing your students' ability to fluently respond to questions, give factual information, express and support their personal and professional opinions on a given, civil engineering related topic.

Furthermore, asking your students to answer or send a voicemail would work as well. During this speaking activity you will be assessing their

skills of organizing longer speech as well as their ability to speak formally, semi-formally, or informally.

You can also design and organize your teaching around short-talk activities. You could, for instance, show them some photos, ask them to choose at least two to talk about them. Do not forget to give them time for preparing the task, at least thirty seconds to gather their thoughts and ideas. You will assess their performance taking into account their ability of describing, comparing, contrasting, suggesting and speculating over a certain topic. As for the follow-up question activities, you can design at least 5 additional questions related to the short-talk activity. Students will have to talk around 30 seconds per question. You will appraise their ingenuity of responding to questions, expressing, justifying, and replying to opinions, expressing their feelings, agreeing or disagreeing. Since it is quite easy to link classroom speaking to OTE preparation, we came to the conclusion that the more meaningful practice we give our students, the more relaxed they will feel about speaking. Do bear in mind that you do not need to hear the truth, you just need to hear something.

The more meaningful practice we give our students, the more relaxed and confident they will feel about speaking. Consequently, teachers are compelled to consider their students' needs, confront their problems and worries, and offer profitable, productive solutions to assist them in improving their speaking skills. As an ESP teacher, I should bear in mind and probably focus my teaching on the motto *I do not need to hear the truth, I just need to hear something*, but sometimes this does not work or apply at all. Why? Since we are regarded as providers of truthful information, we also tend to check and evaluate the quality and content of the information provided. Differently stated, *I just need to hear something within an ESP course* is not enough, it will not work, because what we assess is rather how accurately and efficiently the information supplied is.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up the findings and results of this research, new methods and strategies should be encouraged in order to develop, refine and boost students' English language speaking skills at Ovidius University of Constanta. Since traditional, conventional teaching/learning methods which were mainly teacher-centered and focused on posing comprehension check questions restrain the learners' chance to enjoy or engage in a two-way communication between learners and teacher, the methods discussed in this article are proposed in order to encourage the learners to tackle oral

communication by promoting and cultivating a task-based learning/ teaching style using techniques such as active listening, PEA, daily questions, leaving a voice note, or describing pictures to name just a few.

### **Works Cited**

- Bailey, Kathleen M. *Practical English Language Teaching: Speaking*. New York: McGraw-Hill. Faculty of Arts, (2004). Undergraduate catalog. Nakhon Pathom, Thailand: Silpakorn University Press, 2005.
- Brown, Douglas H. *Language Assessment Principles and Classroom Practices*. London: Pearson Edition, 2004.
- McCafferty, Steven G., Jacobs, George M. & Dasilva Iddings, Anna. Christina. *Cooperative Learning and Second Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2006.
- Chaney, Ann L., Burk, Tamara, L.. *Teaching Oral Communication in Grades K-8*. Boston: Allyn& Bacon, c.1998.
- Celce-Murcia, Marianne, Olshtain, Elite. *Discourse and context in language teaching: CA guide for language teachers*. (p. 102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Goh, Christine. *Teaching speaking in the language classroom*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 2007.
- Harmer, Jeremy. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. London: Longman, 2007.
- Horton, Jake and Armstrong, William. "Turkey earthquake: Why did so many buildings collapse?" in *BBC Reality Check & BBC Monitoring*, 9 February 2023. Online at <https://www.bbc.com/news/64568826>
- Hymes, Dell. "Competence and performance in linguistic theory" in R. Huxley and E. Ingram (eds.). *Language Acquisition: Models and Methods*, 3–28. London: Academic Press, 1971.
- Iqbal, Jameel. *Four language skills*. 2012. Retrieved from <http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/es>.
- Ionițiu, Ionela. *English for Civil Engineering*. Editura Universitară București, 2020.
- Khamkhien, Attapol. "Teaching English speaking and English speaking tests in the Thai context: A reflection from Thai perspectives". *English Language Journal*, (2010): 184-200.
- Larsen-Freeman, Diane, Anderson, Marti. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

- Lazaraton, Anne. “Teaching Oral Skills”, in Marianne Celce-Murcia (ed) *Teaching English as a Second Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 2001.
- Savignon, Sandra. *Communicative Competence: Theory and Classroom Practice* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997.
- Sielaff, Christopher K., Washburn Erin K. “The PEA Strategy: One Teacher's Approach to Integrating Writing in the Social Studies Classroom”, *The Social Studies*, 106:4, (2015): 178-185. DOI: 10.1080/00377996.2015.1043616.
- Srinivas Rao, P. “Developing Speaking Skills in ESL or EFL Settings” in *International Journal Of English Language, Literature And Translation Studies* (Ijelr), Vol. 5. Issue. 2, (2018): 286-293. DOI: 10.33329/ijelr.52.286.
- Swain, Merrill. “The Output Hypothesis and Beyond: Mediating Acquisition through Collaborative Dialogue”. In *Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition*, Ed. James P. Lantolf, OUP, 2000. 97-114.
- Underwood, Mary. *Teaching listening comprehension*. London: Longman, 1989.
- Widdowson, Henry G. *Aspects of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

### **Image references**

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peles\\_Castle\\_in\\_Sinaia.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peles_Castle_in_Sinaia.JPG)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cazinoul\\_din\\_Constanta.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cazinoul_din_Constanta.jpg)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bran\\_Castle\\_-\\_Castelul\\_Bran.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bran_Castle_-_Castelul_Bran.JPG)

<https://pxhere.com/en/photo/533869>