

Defining needs, setting targets and looking at strategies
Speaking

You have decided to improve your speaking skills but you are not sure about which area to work on. Before you can set a target for your independent study plan you will need to take the following steps:

1. Think about why you want to improve your speaking skills
2. Work out more precisely where your main problems are in speaking
3. Find out what causes your problems and which skills and techniques you may need to work on

1. Why do you want to improve your speaking skills?

Think about the following reasons, tick the one(s) that most affect you and add your own if they do not match your situation.

- I need to speak to my lecturers in English for tutorials etc.
- I have to do oral presentations in English for my courses.
- I want to perform well in job interviews, which may be in English.
- I would like to travel overseas and need to function in an English-speaking environment.
- I have to take a test before graduating and it involves a speaking component.
- I would like to be able to speak to native speakers more easily without fear.
- Add your own _____

2. What are your problems in speaking?

a) Look at the problems described below. They are all problems related to speaking skills. Tick any problems you have.

a) I can't keep going when I talk – I break down and stop.	b) I can't express myself clearly.	c) I get nervous in speaking situations.
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b) What do you think might cause these problems? Look at the list below and match the possible causes with the problems you ticked above. You may find more than one cause for each problem.

1. I can't recall the right word when I need to use it.	2. My grammar is weak and it makes my meaning confused.	3. My pronunciation is weak.	4. I think in Chinese first.	5. I can't organise my ideas when I speak in English.
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c) Are there any other factors which cause you problems when speaking in English?

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3. Techniques to use for your problems

Have a look at some suggested techniques and strategies – there could be many more. Mark the ones you think would be interesting and useful for you.

Skills and techniques that will help you improve on the problems above.

1. Can't recall the right word

- Boost your general vocabulary level
- Practise activating your passive vocabulary
- Predict words that may come up in a particular speaking situation
- Prepare and practise key words for a rehearsed speaking situation (presentation, interview)
- Practise speaking with a friend and choose the topic beforehand – prepare key words you'll need and find ways to use them in the conversation

2. Weak grammar makes meaning confused

- Find out your weakest areas and work on improving them
- Find practice opportunities and focus on your grammar every time you speak
- Practise recording yourself and focus on 1 grammar area, after studying it. Playback the recording and count how many times you made a mistake in that area.
- Listen when people correct you in a conversation – there can be valuable clues to our mistakes.

3. Weak pronunciation makes it difficult to understand.

- Find out the cause of your problem – ask a teacher to help you if you don't know.
- Find materials to practise the weak areas
- Record your voice and play it back to check your improvement
- Ask a teacher or international student to listen to you pronouncing a list of words you have practised
- Concentrate on 1 area (eg a consonant) in your next speaking practice – improve 1 thing at a time

4. Thinking in Chinese first

- Write down key words connected with the topic before speaking.
- Write down key points before the speaking situation (predict what may be discussed) to help you think the ideas in English from the start.
- Find more practice opportunities – try to speak regularly (at least twice a week)
- Strategies from 5 may also be useful.

5. Organising ideas in English

- Set up a practice schedule with a friend. Choose the topic before the meeting. Prepare by making notes. Tick off each point as you mention it in the conversation.
- Choose a topic. Jot down some points related to it. Record yourself speaking for a few minutes on this topic. Try to include your points.
- Make quick notes when in a conversation group – look at them just before you speak up.

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4. Summarising your needs

Write a short statement summarizing your **purpose** and **problems** in speaking.

5. Writing a Target

Now write a target for your speaking study plan. Remember that your target should be measurable and achievable, appropriate for your needs, and include a time-frame.